DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 531 CS 211 509

AUTHOR	Jones, Emory D., Ed.
TITLE	The Mississippi Junior College Creative Writing Association: A Decade of Progress.
INSTITUTION	Mississippi Junior Coll. Creative Writing Association.
PUB DATE	87
NOTE	52p.; Small print throughout may not reproduce well.
PUB TYPE	Creative Works (Literature,Drama,Fine Arts) (030) -- Historical Materials (060)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Creative Writing; Higher Education; Student Journals; Student Writing Models; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students; *Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS	Historical Background; Literary Magazines; Mississippi

ABSTRACT

This booklet contains a capsule history of the Mississippi Junior College Creative Writing Association (MJCCWA), its constitution, and the following selected student manuscripts from the past ten years of the MJCCWA's journal, "The Junior College Writer": (1) "Chronology of a Hunt" (William Patrick Story); (2) "House of the 'Possum Hunter" (N. A. McSweyn); (3) "Winter Tree" (Suzanne Pilmer); (4) "Remnant" (Charles Lennie Hill); (5) "Re-Collections (Johnny DuVall); (6) "Daughters of Eve" (Rhonda Dunn); (7) "The Kudzu Caper" (Russell Morgan); (8) "Uncle Sidney's Laying Out" (Tammy Smith); (9) "Beautiful Swimmer" (Elaine McDermott); (10) "Magnolia Blossom" (Lisa Winters); (11) "The Good Old Days?" (Deloris Moore); (12) "The Old Harp Singing" (Rebecca Moore); (13) "From Our Vantage Point" (Amy House); (14) "Baby Rose" (Sandra Cooper); (15) "Mother's Dream Machine" (Kim Clements); (16) "Unfinished Portrait" (Frances Pounds); (17) "The Blue Parlor" (Bobbie Crudup); (18) "Reminiscence" (Joseph Alexander); (19) "Kitten Touches Back" (Suzanne Clemons); (20) "A New Ritual" (Pat Hassell); (21) "On Changing a Flat Tire and Wondering Where to Go" (Jessica Mullen); and (22) "The Cock Fight" (Pat Hassell). (MS)

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THE MISSISSIPPI JUNIOR COLLEGE CREATIVE WRITING ASSOCIATION: A DECADE OF PROGRESS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CAPSULE HISTORY----------i

CONSTITUTION----------i

THE SELECTIONS

CHRONOLOGY OF A HUNT by William Patrick Story----------1
(Northeast Mississippi Junior College)

HOUSE OF THE 'POSSUM HUNTER by N. A. McSwayn----------3
(Hinds Junior College)

WINTER TREE by Suzanne Pilmer----------3
(Meridian Junior College)

REMNANT by Charles Lennie Hill----------4
(Northeast Mississippi Junior College)

RE-COLLECTIONS by Johnny DuVall----------9
(Northeast Mississippi Junior College)

DAUGHTERS OF EVE by Rhonda Dunn----------10
(Northeast Mississippi Junior College)

THE KUDZU CAPER by Russell Morgan----------15
(Meridian Junior College)

UNCLE SIDNEY'S LAYING OUT by Tammy Smith----------19
(Copiah-Lincoln Junior College)

BEAUTIFUL SWIMMER by Elaine McDermott----------21
(Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College--Jefferson Davis Campus)

MAGNOLIA BLOSSOM by Lisa Winters----------22
(Northeast Mississippi Junior College)

THE GOOD OLD DAYS? by Deloris Moore----------24
(Mississippi Delta Junior College)

THE OLD HARP SINGING by Rebecca Moore----------25
(Itawamba Junior College)

FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT by Amy House----------26
(Holmes Junior College)

BABY ROSE by Sandra Cooper----------27
(Copiah-Lincoln Junior College)

MOTHER'S DREAM MACHINE by Kim Clements----------31
(Mississippi Delta Junior College)

UNFINISHED PORTRAIT by Frances Pounds----------31
(Northeast Mississippi Junior College)

THE BLUE PARLOR by Bobbie Crudup----------32
(Meridian Junior College)

REMINISCENCE by Joseph Alexander----------36
(Holmes Junior College)

KITTEN TOUCHES BACK by Suzanne Clemons----------36
(Northeast mississippi Junior College)

A NEW RITUAL by Pat Hassell----------40
(Meridian Junior College)

ON CHANGING A FLAT TIRE AND WONDERING WHERE TO GO by Jessica Mullen--------41
(Hinds Junior College)

THE COCK FIGHT by Pat Hassell----------41
(Meridian Junior College)

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CAPSULE HISTORY
OF THE
MISSISSIPPI JUNIOR COLLEGE
CREATIVE WRITING ASSOCIATION

The Mississippi Junior College Creative Writing Association was founded in 1978 for the purpose of identifying and developing literary talents and interests in Mississippi public junior college students, promoting the operation of literary competitions on the various campuses, encouraging the publication of student literary journals at these junior colleges, providing critical evaluation of student writing through both a state-wide competition and workshop, and publishing student writing in a state junior college student literary journal, The Junior College Writer. The Mississippi public junior colleges responded positively to the letters of inquiry, and committees were formed to plan and organize the association.

The MJCCWA could not have come into being and flourished without the wholehearted support of the presidents of the Mississippi public junior colleges. Their organization, the Mississippi Junior College Association, has been most generous in funding the MJCCWA.

The MJCCWA held its first annual workshop meeting on the campus of Mississippi Delta Junior College in Moorhead, MS, on Saturday, March 10, 1979. Ninety-three participants from nine of the sixteen Mississippi public junior colleges attended. Approximately sixty students participated in the first MJCCWA Student Writing Competition. First place, second place, third place and honorable mentions were awarded in the categories of poetry, short story, formal essay, and informal essay. The category of one-act play was added the next year. The monetary award for the first year was only $5.00 for first place in each category, with the money being contributed by the teachers and sponsors present. With monetary awards included in the MJCCWA's budget the next year, the awards were set at $25 for first place, $15 for second place, and $10 for third place in the five categories--a total of $250 for student awards.

Such renowned authors as Ellen Douglas and Patrick D. Smith have addressed the MJCCWA annual workshop meeting. Such practicing writers and artists as John Maxwell, Charles Ghigna, Glenn Swetman, and Price Caldwell have served as MJCCWA judge-consultants. A unique feature of the MJCCWA is that the judges of the competition also serve as consultants in the workshop and are thus better able to give the student writers sound criticism on their manuscripts.

The MJCCWA annual workshop has been hosted by the following Mississippi public junior colleges: Copiah-Lincoln Junior College (Natchez Campus) in 1980, Hinds Junior College (Raymond Campus) in 1981, Northeast Mississippi Junior College in 1982, Meridian Junior College in 1983, Holmes Junior College in 1984, Itawamba Junior College in 1985, Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College (Jefferson Davis Campus in Gulfport) in 1986, and Pearl River Junior College in 1987. Under the influence of the MJCCWA, creative writing classes have been established at such junior colleges as Meridian Junior College and Itawamba Junior College and at least one local student literary journal has been founded, Writers Inc. at Hinds Junior College (Raymond Campus). Over the years, nineteen Mississippi public junior colleges and branch campuses have participated in the MJCCWA Student Writing Competition and/or the MJCCWA Annual Workshop Meeting. Eighty entries from fifty-six students of ten Mississippi public junior colleges or branch campuses were entered in the 1986-87 MJCCWA Student Writing Competition: twelve short stories, thirty-eight poems, six one-act plays, nine formal essays, and fourteen informal essays. Over 500 students have submitted approximately 650 manuscripts to the MJCCWA Student Writing Competition during the past decade, and 155 students have won 199 awards. Several of these students have published their writings following their participation in the MJCCWA. It is, of course, difficult to measure the influence of the MJCCWA upon those students who have participated, but such participation has obviously encouraged some of them, particularly the ones who continue to publish their writing.

CONSTITUTION OF THE
MISSISSIPPI JUNIOR COLLEGE CREATIVE WRITING ASSOCIATION
(Revised--11 April 1980; 6 March 1982; 25 March 1983;
11 April 1986; 27 March 1987)

We, the representatives of the Mississippi public junior colleges, in order to provide an organization for the promotion of creative writing among the students of the Mississippi public junior colleges hereby establish this constitution.

ARTICLE I--NAME

The name of this Association shall be the Mississippi Junior College Creative Writing Association.

ARTICLE II--PURPOSE

The purpose of the Mississippi Junior College Creative Writing Association shall be to identify and to develop literary talents and interests in Mississippi public junior colleges, to promote the operation of local competitions, to encourage the publication of local literary journals, to provide critical evaluation of student writing through both a state-wide competition and a state-wide workshop.

ARTICLE III--MEMBERSHIP

The membership of this Association shall be the public junior colleges of Mississippi. Eligibility for membership shall be determined by the Executive Committee of this Association.

ARTICLE IV--REPRESENTATION

Each Mississippi public junior college shall be entitled to a faculty representative appointed by either the chairperson of the English department or the director of the Humanities division. Each representative shall be entitled to one vote.

ARTICLE V--OFFICERS

The officers of this Association shall be President, Vice-President, Secretary-Treasurer, Competition Coordinator, Local Arrangements Coordinator, and Historian. The offices of President and Local Arrangements Coordinator shall be combined as dictated by the needs of the Association.

ARTICLE VI--DUTIES OF OFFICERS

Section 1--The President shall preside at all regular meetings, serve as Chairman of the Executive Committee, call special meetings of the Executive Committee as needed, and direct the business of the Association between the annual sessions of the Association.

Section 2--The Vice-President shall preside in the absence of the President and shall perform any and all functions in the absence of the President; and, in addition, the Vice-President shall be the editor of the Association's journal. The Vice-President shall also serve as Chairman of the permanent Editorial Committee.

Section 3--The Secretary-Treasurer shall keep the records of the Association and inform the member schools of the general business of the Association; and, in addition, the Secretary-Treasurer shall serve as the financial officer of the Association by clearing invoices and dispensing funds upon the approval of the President. The Secretary-Treasurer shall be from the same junior college English department as the President.

Section 4--The Competition Coordinator shall select the judges for the annual competition, receive the manuscripts, serve as Chairman of the permanent Screening Committee, disperse the manuscripts to the judges, notify the competition winners, and deliver the competition manuscripts to the Vice-President.

Section 5--The Local Arrangements Coordinator shall be the representative from the junior college which will host the annual workshop. The Local Arrangements Coordinator shall make the necessary arrangements for the conduct of the annual workshop.

Section 6--The Historian will be appointed by the President and shall serve, in an advisory capacity, on the Executive Committee. The Historian shall keep an up-to-date file of the records of the Association to be provided by each succeeding Secretary-Treasurer.

ARTICLE VII-- STANDING COMMITTEES

Section 1--The Executive Committee shall consist of the President, Vice-President, Secretary-Treasurer, Competition Coordinator, Local Arrangements Coordinator, the immediate Past President, and at least five other representatives elected annually. The current President shall preside at all meetings of the Executive Committee. The at-large members of the Executive Committee shall be elected at the annual meeting of the Association from member junior colleges not otherwise represented on the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee shall serve as a nominating committee for the Association as well as conduct the regular business of the Association in cooperation with the President.

Section 2--The Screening Committee shall be chaired by the Competition Coordinator and shall coordinate the manuscripts submitted to the annual competition.

Section 3--The Editorial Committee shall be chaired by the Vice-President and shall consist of members of the same junior college English department of which the Vice-President is a member. The Editorial Committee shall assist the Vice-President in the publication of the Association's journal.

ARTICLE VIII--ELECTION AND TERMS OF OFFICERS

Section 1--The Executive Committee shall present a slate of nominees to the annual meeting of the Association. The annual meeting shall be open for additional nominations.

Section 2--All officers shall be elected by a simple majority of those voting representatives present and voting at the annual meeting of the Association.

Section 3--No officer shall serve more than two successive one-year terms, except for the Vice-President, who shall serve a two-year term.

ARTICLE IX--COMPETITION

Section 1--The Association shall conduct an annual creative writing competition and shall award certificates for the first, second, and third place winners in each category.

Section 2--the four categories are informal essay, formal essay, poetry, and short story. Additional categories may be added at the discretion of the Executive Committee.

Section 3--Each manuscript shall be typed, and prose manuscripts shall be double-spaced. Each poetry entry shall not exceed 100 lines, and each short story entry shall not exceed 2500 words. Each manuscript shall include a detachable cover sheet upon which the student's name and junior college are centered. All manuscripts shall be submitted to the Competition Coordinator by the reasonable deadline set by the Executive Committee.

Section 4--Only unpublished material (except that published in campus papers or journals) is eligible. Each member junior college may submit one or two manuscripts in any or all categories but no more than two manuscripts in any single category. Only one manuscript per category from any one student will be accepted.

Section 5--Only undergraduate students of participating Mississippi public junior colleges are eligible for this competition. Students may enter the competition for no more than three years.

ARTICLE X--JUDGES OF MANUSCRIPTS

Judges of the manuscripts shall be selected by the Competition Coordinator with the approval of the Executive Committee. Judges shall give critical comment on each manuscript and rank them according to first, second, and third place in each category.

ARTICLE XI--ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the Mississippi Junior College Creative Writing Association shall be held at one of the member junior colleges. The Executive Committee shall consider invitations from any of the member junior colleges and shall announce at the business session of the annual meeting the host junior college for the next year(s). The annual creative writing workshop shall be conducted at the annual meeting. A participation fee shall be charged each participant to cover such expenses as printing the program and the banquet. The competition judges shall serve as the workshop consultants, basing their sessions on their criticism of the competition entries. The first, second, and third place winners in each category shall be honored with certificates and prizes during the workshop. The annual business session shall conclude the annual meeting.

ARTICLE XII--PRELIMINARY COMPETITIONS

The Association shall foster the establishment and maintenance of preliminary competitions in all member junior colleges to identify and develop the most capable student writers. The member junior colleges should conduct their local competitions sufficiently early in the year to submit the winning manuscripts to the Competition Coordinator by February 15 or a reasonable deadline set by the Executive Committee.

ARTICLE XIII--LOCAL JOURNALS

The Association shall foster the publication of local literary journals in all member junior colleges in order to give interested students a publication outlet as well as to furnish an opportunity for the winners of the local competition to publish their works.

ARTICLE XIV--ASSOCIATION'S JOURNAL

The Association shall publish a journal from the manuscripts entered in the Association's creative writing competition. The first two winners in each category shall be published. Each participating junior college shall have at least one entry in the Association's journal. The Association shall publish its journal during the fall semester following the Association's annual meeting in the spring semester. The final decision concerning the selections for the journal will be at the discretion of the Editorial Committee.

ARTICLE XV--AMENDMENTS

Any member junior college may submit amendments to this constitution to the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee shall distribute the amendments to the representatives from the member junior colleges. The Executive Committee shall then present the amendment to the annual business session. A two- thirds majority of those representatives present and voting shall amend this constitution.

AMENDMENTS

AMENDMENT I--EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE VACANCIES

With the approval of the Executive Committee, the President shall fill any vacancies on the Executive Committee by appointing persons from member junior colleges not otherwise represented on the Executive Committee (with the exception of a vacancy in the office of Secretary-Treasurer) to serve out the year.

THE SELECTIONS

CHRONOLOGY OF A HUNT

by
William Patrick Story
(Northeast Mississippi
Junior College)
2nd Place Poetry, 1979

the day is awaited
by anxious, impatient men
who
slaver over the date upon the calendar
as a child over christmas
the day when weeks
of cleaning and
oiling
and test-firing
are to be
married
with their purpose
and
consumated

---

they arise at 3 a.m.
gone by 3:30
in jeeps and four wheel drives
less like the advance force
for some gigantic army
than the bulk of the great force itself
rolling to battle in chevrolet tanks
their loads of
firepower
splay out of the windows
their trucks seem to
bristle
like huge
monolithic porcupines
with rifled
blued-steel
quills

---

the countryside
reels
with blaze orange
and forest green
camouflage

---

floorboard after floorboard
with case after case
of jack daniels
schlitz
"budweihzer"
boxes of shells
canteens full of whiskey
and men
with caps as red as their necks
necks as red as their eyes
and eyes as red as the
blood
they want to spill

---

red man, sweet garrett and skoal

---

death
"good shots"
that cleanly
pierce the heart
"bad shots"
that
split the skull
like an eggshell

and spill grey
yolk
upon the ground
photographs
first kill
biggest kill
kill by youngest hunter
kill by oldest hunter
most kills in one day

30:30
30 ought 6
22
32
38
20 guage
410
12 guage
10 guage
slugs
double-ought buckshot
soft point
hollow point
dum-dums
high velocity
"range 1 mile"
lever action
bolt action
automatic
plugs
variable chokes
gas escape chambers
and a 10 power scope

a war of technology

"Y'know, one time last year I was huntin' about five miles south o' here when somebody run up through th' woods an' says they done lost a fifteen year-old-boy up aroun' in there. So we started a-lookin', looked all day. That night they put out a bunch o' them big ol' searchlights like they shine up in th' sky, y' know, an' shined 'em up through the fog so's the boy could see 'em an' walk towards 'em. Well, th' nex' day, they fount him slumped up agin a tree with a hole this big blowed through his chest. Didn't kill him right off though, he crawled 'bout fifty feet t' that tree after he was shot, 'n then he died there."

"Aw c'mon!"

"Yip!"

"Wal, a guy needs t' watch hisself out in the woods like that. Hey, did I tell ya 'bout that new pointer I bought? Paid fifteen hunert fer 'im,' but he's a beauty."

"Naw."

---

dusk
and those who
don't
shoot themselves
or get shot by others
or get killed while
driving home drunk
do it again tomorrow

HOUSE OF THE 'POSSUM HUNTER

by

N. A. McSweyn
(Hinds Junior College)

2nd Place Informal Essay, 1979

It is a nice cool, brisk autumn day, this Sunday in October. The tall pecans have released all their leaves but still hold stubbornly to their cluster of nuts. A small frost has nipped at the field grass, but it will be another two or three weeks before a killing frost comes.

Down from the big old house we go, my two sons and I. They have decided that today they will explore the woods at grandmother's. My wife, being overly protective as usual, sees that I guide this adventure.

For two small boys exposed only to patterned sub-divisions, tailored lawns, and manicured playgrounds each step is a new adventure. They cannot understand the seemingly endless carpet of leaves, but instinctively, as all children will, they roll and tumble in them.

At the end of the hollow they find their greatest discovery, a chimney still standing with the skeletal remains of a foundation. Made of hand-hewn split pine, the beams are still solid. One could almost feel them say "Build on me again," but with a deep saddening, you know that they belong to a time past. It was here in what had been a small sharecropper's house that C.D. and Hattie had lived. Hattie helped grandmother in the house and C.D., well, I don't think he ever did anything, except hunt.

To a young boy of nine, C.D. was awesome. Almost as old as my grandfather, he was a giant of a man. With skin black as ebony, gray hair, he always wore an old dress coat and a felt hat pulled down on the right to cover up the hollow where the eye had been. Often, during the cold, he would rub the cheek and temple around the hollow, and once, after I had worked up the nerve, I asked him what happened. "That eye belonged to a devil," he said, "and he takes what's his." That was all he said and I never questioned him again.

In time we became the closest of friends, and it was he who introduced me to hunting. He could always find the feeding tree of squirrels. Many a time though, I would scare them off. I never could find the patience he had to sit absolutely still for what seemed like hours.

But of all the hunting, his greatest love had to be 'possum hunting. Many a night in the late fall, C.D., my cousin, and I would make the rounds of the persimmon trees. We would find them in the trees with his light and use sticks to drive them down. Then C.D. would throw a cracker sack over the 'possum. He never shot one. Each catch would go into an old chicken coop behind the house where he would fatten it up.

With the 'possums in the bag, the best part of the evening lay ahead. For Hattie always had hot biscuits, salt pork, and coffee waiting. Mine was always milk with a little coffee in it. We all gathered around the hearth of the fireplace to eat, and C.D. always had an eager audience in a pair of young ears. Whether it was 'coon hunting or 'possum hunting, he always had a couple of yarns that held us spell-bound. Then around eleven, Hattie always made him walk us up to the big house.

Now, as my sons explore this old chimney and walk these beams, I wonder who will fill this role in their lives. I fear they will never know the woods as I did or the friend I had. Far removed from that world today, I ponder the justice of modern civilization on the childhood of my sons.

"Was this a ship?" asked my oldest.

"No, my son, this was the house of the 'possum hunter," I replied.

WINTER TREE

by

Suzanne Pilmer
(Meridian Junior College)

1st Place Poetry, 1980

How many hours
Have I observed your branches
Laid bare to winter half-light
Wanting canvas and brush?

Your skeleton fingers
Softly call my attention
To their intrepid play
Against the sky.
Surely the weeds
Whispering among themselves
As they do,
Must agree this sight makes
The hardy evergreens
Seem bashful in comparison.

REMNANT
by
Charles Lennie Hill
(Northeast Mississippi
Junior College)
1st Place Drama, 1980

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Leslie Whilford
Everett Whilford
Jan Donner
Richard Donner
Various Guests
Ghost of Stephen Whilford

SETTING

On a bare stage there are two doors. They are center stage and face each other approximately three feet apart. This setting represents two apartments and a hall that separates them. The one stage right is modern. The one stage left has a Victorian setting. The action occurring in the different rooms will be denoted Donner (modern setting) and Whilford (Victorian setting)

Lights come up on Whilford side. An old lady sits near a table center stage; there is another chair at the end of the table. While reading a book, she turns reluctantly to stand, facing the audience.

LESLIE: Marriage? I had two chances at it. At one time I even seriously considered remarriage. The first was an entrepeneur, a true man of business. And his establishment was very successful throughout several Southern states. I changed my mind for perhaps my own silly notion of what woman in my social level should be. You see, during Stephen's War, the man I had planned to join in marriage produced armaments for the War. The man didn't actually fight in the War; he was not there to march in parades to the train. Stephen was there in his uniform--and, not like he would be gone forever, but only for a short time to rebuke an enemy of the world. In the years of war, he wrote me often--twice a month, at least. Through this I learned much about young men, their honor and their hypocrisy. Someone like Stephen though is bound to make his War a romantic one, a story of gallantry....

Lights down on Whilford side. Lights up on Donner side. We see no one in the Donner Apartment, but Jan Donner is in the kitchen out of the audience's view. Enter Richard Donner. He is clothed in sweaty tennis attire. He trots in and slams the door.

RICHARD: Jen, Jen...

JAN: What?

RICHARD: I finally beat Rob in five sets.

JAN: What do you mean?

RICHARD: (sarcastically) If you remember...I went to the Racquet Club today.

Jan Donner enters from door stage right.

JAN: Yes, I remember you said you'd go by Union Planters and check on that loan.

Richard sits down on the couch and opens a magazine.

RICHARD: Well, that's no problem. If we get it, we'll get it. We don't have to worry about it coming through.

JAN: (shaking her head, maybe kidding) You're so irresponsible and inconsiderate of me sometimes. (pause) Come on, let's eat before I throw out the shrimp gumbo.

She goes back into the kitchen. At last Richard throws down the magazine and joins her in the kitchen.

Lights down on Donner side. Lights up on Whilford side. Leslie is standing near a hat rack which is near the edge of the stage. On it are Stephen's uniform and dough-boy helmet. She is straightening and even pampering them as she begins to speak.

LESLIE: They were such brave souls that went to war in 1917. It was the last gentleman's war. (She then turns to face the audience.) Then all was right for Stephen to have had a part. (From the table she picks up a letter and begins to read from it.)

"The war," he said, "is expected to last only shortly with several campaigns to push the German hordes out of France.Not one of my platoon"--regiment would have sounded better--"has been lost to sickness or disease. This is all well."

I felt so exhilarated at that point, I tried to write him more often. Unlike many other young couples in 1917, we did not marry before he shipped out--and I'm glad we didn't. The War brought us so much closer together. Through these correspondences, I understood him so much better when he returned. But he did not want a military ceremony.

At this point a ghostly figure dressed in black with white face and hands enters only briefly. Lights down on Whilford side. Lights up on Donner side. The Donners are getting ready to go out with two of Richard's unmarried friends. First, Jan enters, crosses into the living room, picks up some papers on the couch, and exits. Richard enters straightening his tie. He walks quickly off. Jan enters putting on her blazer.

JAN: Richard, my gosh. Hurry up. We're going to be late.

RICHARD: (offstage) Patience!

JAN: Oh come off it, Richard....

RICHARD: (entering) Keep your pants on for a few minutes, please! (he picks up his jacket from chair and puts it on) I'm going out to the car.

JAN: Wait a minute.

RICHARD: What?

JAN: We need to talk...(Richard returns to the chair and plops down; even though he looks as though he is about to be chewed out, he looks more disgusted than anything.)

RICHARD: (sighing) Go ahead, tell me.

JAN: Jean and Eric....

RICHARD: What's wrong with them? Have I picked out yet another rotten couple to go out with us?

JAN: No, it's just that they are not married.

RICHARD: Well, I'm sorry that I just can't find any married couples to go out with us in the whole of the Crump Building.

JAN: Maybe I'll find a couple at work.

RICHARD: What are Jean and Eric? Plague carriers?

JAN: No, Richard. But I'm sure they are uncomfortable around us.

RICHARD: If you remember, we met on a double date with married people..

JAN: Well, what's on the marquee at the Hilton?

RICHARD: I'm not sure. Let's just go.

There are several moments of silence. Then they both exit through hall. Lights down on Donner side and up on Whilford side. Leslie is pacing carrying letters. At this time, the ghost is standing stage center with his arms folded, seeming to wait patiently.

LESLIE: (reading from one of the letters) "I believe in it," Stephen said several months later. "It must be God's will that the Allies drive out the Hun. But how can He let it continue--this trench warfare?

The conditions here are wretched. We must wait for a barrage before the watch captain signals 'over-the-top.' Sometimes the battery doesn't receive the same orders when we do. Then we must attack and half of the men in the assault are butchered. And they lie in the muddy trenches in blood and typhoid and mustard gas. It makes me want to die in the overcast day of late October when the dead are all around, and I look out across 'no-man's-land' and see the marred, disfigured trees and the spiraling, tangled barbed wire with the dead dangling from it. I hear them calling, the ghosts in drab olive and grey bleeding the blood of their countries, their fathers, and of their convictions. I can see the grotesque barbarism of all this. And the dead--it is hell at midnight."

Leslie moves to stage front.

Stephen, don't worry. You are all right. I know you're a Christian and the Lord has a great plan for everyone who believes. Be patient--when you come home we can be wed as you proposed. We can be together forever.

She goes over to the table, picks up another letter, returns to stage front and continues reading.

Oh...

"The cannonades now are multicolored crepe streamers lobbing through the air, brilliantly exploding hot amber confetti, torching up the black sky. At night, I see moons, planets, entire galaxies--red smoke escaping to rend the eastern sky. The death of soldiers is beautiful in a cannonade. When hit, whipping pinwheels of blood and entrails spray out--a bouquet of pretty red carnations! Dying is beautiful. They all die. Ah, to die in agony!

Leslie pauses.

"My friend's hand was shot off last Monday. When we left the trench, it was severed and fell on the lip of the trench. The hand lay there, not pumping blood, but as an overturned glass of water--running out on the ground."

Why do you think such things? Stephen, my gallant beloved, what have you endured?

Leslie pauses.

I've stayed here with your letters and Jesus. What have I endured--waiting for you? All this time!

The ghost's expression melts to one of sympathy. Lights down on Whilford side and up on Donner side. Dressed in a robe, Richard is watching television. It is the middle of the day, and he is watching a soap opera. Jan enters from hall door. She is dressed in standard blazer. She carries a smug expression.

JAN: Richard, I got moved up today.

RICHARD: (engrossed in the idiocy of the soap opera) What?

JAN: I've been employed with Meyers in Clark Tower.

RICHARD: Yeah..(shifting, still watching television)

Jan walks over and turns the television off.

JAN: I said I've been hired as a business exec.

RICHARD: (straightening up and finally paying some attention) For who?

JAN: Meyers, Inc.

RICHARD: Well, what exactly do they do?

JAN: I'm in charge of twelve agents selling design and architecture insurance.

RICHARD: How much?

JAN: I'm on straight salary for just nine months--$550.00 a week.

RICHARD: Hmm...(turning head slightly away from her)

JAN: This means more money coming in.

RICHARD: This is true. Just in time. We also get to figure out how to spend it. Always happens. When we get financially stabilized, you get a promotion or move to another company. I'm tired of you try-

ing to out-do me just to out-do me. There's no sense in it. You're working against us!

JAN: I'm working against us? Look at us. You got mad when I graduated from UT. You were teed-off when I got my first job with Century 21. Now this job with Meyers has really got you hacked, hasn't it?

Richard gets up slowly and leaves the apartment. Outside, he puts his hand up against the wall, seeming to brace himself with his hand. He is angry-- at himself more than anything. A young black janitor comes along in front of him in the corridor. He is sweeping along the corners and has a vacuum cleaner ready to go down the middle. He stops at Leslie's door, knocks on it, and the pounds on it.

JANITOR: Hey, Mrs. Whilford. (pauses) Hey! Come on, open up. (pounds on the door some more) Umph!

The janitor returns to his vacuum cleaner but is stopped by Richard.

RICHARD: (momentarily breaking free of his own dilemma) Who lives in that apartment?

JANITOR: Oh--that's Mrs. Whilford that lives in there. I ain't seen her since I been here. My daddy's worked here a long time before I came. He says she's sick in the head. She never comes out; nobody ever goes in. My daddy's seen her nephew pay the rent every month. I ain't never seen him even.

RICHARD: So she hasn't been out....

JANITOR: (interrupting) About every month, a man brings her groceries--all that woman eats is baby food. I sho' feels sorry for somebody reduced to that.

RICHARD: But she hasn't been out....

JANITOR: (moving on) Yeah, as far as I know...She ain't been outta there since my daddy's time.

The janitor moves on down the corridor whistling. Richard turns the other way.

Lights down on Donner side and up on Whilford side. Leslie is sitting at her end of the table. The ghost is sitting at the opposite end of the table just looking at her. As if breaking from a trance, Leslie raises her head from the table.

LESLIE: The letters from Stephen grew less disturbing as the War diminished. I had a vision last night...that I rode through a morass that flowed creepingly, a river that ended down among cypress in cowslips, milkweed, and wild phlox. I was taken up by a large harnessed eagle and was carried through the cloud banks to a high temple and inside there was a marble colossus clad in a golden breast-plate, helmet and sword. Cracks severed the statue. It toppled over--face forward--and was broken on the rich tiled floor. As I left on the back of the eagle, I saw the temple fall--consumed from within and without by hell-fire. The moon was blood red. Time and space escaped me, left me behind. The tempters came and scoffed at my face. The nasty, the impure, the lepers sat around me and spat in my face. Liars and demons roared at my faith and laughed at my sorrow. No man cared for my soul!

She begins to cry but holds back all signs of emotion. She gets up from the chair and walks to center stage.

I wonder where he is. (pauses) Then I saw all evil pass away at last and swirl down a spinning whirlpool of blasphemy and excrement. The unbelievers were struck and died again. And they were all sucked down into outer darkness. I saw Him--in perfection before Him. "She is mine," he explained. He then said with a gentleness that could never be expressed (long pause), "He is..within the city." I awoke here at this table where I had spent so many nights before. What I had worried about all my life was vain. There is none there. But this is better.

Lights down on Whilford side and up on Donner side. A big party is in full swing. At least ten couples are present. Their conversations are loud and boisterous. Jan is talking to a group when Richard enters from hall door. He walks in almost unnoticed and is shocked by the rudeness of the guests. He storms over to Jan as the guests' noise fades but their mouths continue to move.

RICHARD: Jan! How irresponsible! How could you possibly be so neglectful? Not even telling me about the party. I.....

JAN: (interrupting) Oh shut up, Richard! My friends are special to me and if they want a party, why not give them one?

RICHARD: Your friends are disgusting. I can't stand them. They don't even acknowledge my existence.

JAN: You've never tried to communicate with them--to understand they are individuals and mean something.

RICHARD: Yeah, I'm sure. (The party people just stare at each other and move their mouths mechanically--still saying nothing--meaning nothing) Jan, you know what the problem is? We're legally married--that's all.

Exit Richard. Jan follows him to the door, places her hand on the door knob, and lowers her head. The sounds of the party increase again with everyone in his original position except Jan. She remains at the door.

Lights down on Donner side. Spot comes up on Whilford side. Leslie's clothes lie on the edge of the table and on the chair as if she were sleeping there with her head resting on the table.

Lights full on Whilford side. Enter Stephen's ghost and stands patiently just on the edge of the stage lighting with his hands down to his sides. From the other side of the room, Leslie's ghost enters dressed in black with white face and hands. She stops at the table and places her hand on it. She turns and looks at Stephen's ghost opposite her.

Lights dim out on Whilford side and come up on Donner side. Richard and Jan enter simultaneously from opposite sides. They automatically turn away at first but then come to sit down together on the couch.

JAN: I'm sorry about last...

RICHARD: (snapping and emotional) That's not the problem. (long pause) You know what the problem is? You're not playing your part in the relationship. And it's not just you...it's me too. God, I can't explain and maybe you don't understand, but we have to do something to turn it around.

JAN: (glassy-eyed) But wha...(long pause)

RICHARD: (steady and sure of himself now) Hey, listen. I just remembered. There's an old lady that lives across the hall from us. (he thinks for a minute) And she doesn't have any folks that visit her much. I think it would be great if we could give her a surprise party.

JAN: (with excitement) Yeah Richard. You could invite some of your friends and I could invite some of mine. We could have it here.

RICHARD: As a matter of fact, we can have it next week.

JAN: Call your friends and I'll check on decorations.

Exit Jan. Richard goes over to the telephone and begins to dial. Lights down on Donner side. There is a pounding on Leslie's apartment door. There are murmuring voices outside and more knocking. A key turns in the lock. The door creaks open loudly.

RICHARD: Get the lights...

Lights come up on Whilford side. Jan, Richard, and the janitor are inside the room. The other guests remain outside. They are awed by what they see. On the floor, Leslie is lying on her side with her face down. Her chair is overturned. Jan turns and stabs her face into Richard's chest.

Lights dim out on Whilford side. After long pause, lights come back up on Whilford side. A coffin is now on the table. It has been moved against the corner. There are several chairs lined up in the foreground. Jan and Richard are sitting in two chairs facing the coffin. They remain still for several minutes. Enter Everett Whilford. He walks to the coffin laden table.

EVERETT: (speaking to the coffin) Were you the couple who called? (short pause as Jan and Richard stare at him)

RICHARD: Yess.....

EVERETT: (laughing) Humma. I didn't know Leslie Whilford. I'll bet you didn't know her either.

JAN: No, we had never seen her before...

EVERETT: Well, she never had anybody...She lived here all by herself for... oh, since her husband died. And, Lord, it must have been a good fifty years ago.

RICHARD: What? You mean she's lived in this...

EVERETT: (interrupting) Yeah--since before I was born she used her house as a boarding house for just about anybody who would come in. Later she sold it to some real estate developers, and they made apartments out of it. But she (looking around) kept this apartment just as it is

JAN: You say she was married?

EVERETT: Oh, she married my great-uncle when he came back after World War I, but...I don't know... He died about five days after their wedding He drowned while fishing in Lauderdale County. Seems to be all we know. (pause) The family's been paying her rent every month since she sold the house to the apartment managers. She hasn't seen anybody all this time either, I suppose. I'm glad she didn't suffer much....

Exit Everett Whilford. After a long pause, the Donnors stand. They look at each other for a long moment and then exit. Lights down on Whilford side, but spot comes up on Whilford side. The ghosts appear behind the coffin. They look toward the apartment door and back out of the spot. Fade spot.

RE-COLLECTIONS
by
Johnny DuVall
(Northeast Mississippi
Junior College)
1st Place Poetry, 1981

Seashells gathered on a skeleton beach,
in an old jute, spread out on the
tongue-in-groove. Like a kid brother,
you'd stubbornly refuse to stay home.
Kickin' around sometimes all day.

"Gettin' sand in the damn carpet." Remember?
That night we got soused on the
Old Man's gin. Told your mother
we'd eaten berries or something
that made us sick. But she knew.

One summer we made this raft out of milk
jugs, and claimed that old shrimper. I
guess that's the last good one. No, smuggling
the sandshark into the city pool. Nobody
raised hell better baby. But I think that's it.

I distinctly remember one January it
snowed and I plugged you with a big
snowball. I don't guess that counts
because you cried and ran home.
We never spoke real good after that.

Reminiscent madness only comes in the heat
of the night. You too, when you're looking,
will pick one out. Maybe a pink one
you used to like. Pretend. Blow the
sand off into my face. Can you remember?

Seashells we'd pick up, put in a bag,
and spread out on the floor.

DAUGHTERS OF EVE
by
Rhonda Dunn
(Northeast Mississippi
Junior College)
2nd Short Story, 1981

Even with the coolness in the room, her body was covered with a clammy, unnatural sweat. Perspiration and the after effects of cheap liquor oozed from every pore in her skin. With straining effort she dragged her eyelids open. A disgruntled frown covered her face. Her mind struggled trying to remember where she was, trying to remember last night. There was too much fog inside her head. She couldn't think.

She lay still, listening half-consciously to the hum of the air-conditioning. The room was dark except for a thin slice of sunlight cutting its way through the open crack of the heavy commercial draperies. Stale cigarette smoke hung sickeningly in the room and clung to her damp, limp hair. Another smell startled her senses, jolting her fully awake. It was a man's smell. The stench of soured masculine perspiration assailed her nostrils.

God! she thought. She'd slept with him. The man snorted and flopped over onto his back. The bed trembled under the weight of his heavy body. Emily stared at him dully, still unable to remember anything of the night before. Think! she told herself. Think! Where's Dolly?

Stealthily she slipped from beneath the clinging, dingy sheets. She fumbled in the darkness, trying to be quiet, and found her clothes lying in a heap a few feet from the bed. She felt her way to the bathroom making use of the dim glow that filtered through the window. Once inside the bathroom she closed the door silently before turning on the light. She dared not wake the man.

She ran just enough water to wet a washcloth and smeared it haphazardly over her face. The image that peered at her from the mirror didn't look much worse than it had yesterday. Shadows beneath the eyes were just a shade deeper. The crow's feet on either side and the tiny lines about her mouth stood out a little more sharply. Resignedly, she stared back at herself and blinked once, slowly. Emily, old girl, you ain't gettin' any younger, she silently mouthed the words to herself. The whisper of a heavy sigh slipped from her slack mouth, cutting her thoughts, reminding her that she'd better get moving.

Sunday morning--where were they now? Mississippi? Yeah. She was beginning to remember. They had crossed the state line late yesterday. Never been to Mississippi; never wanted to go there. Somebody, who was it? somebody told her once that white men down here still hanged colored folks for gettin' outta line and they said that the womenfolks were fond of shooting whores for sleeping with their husbands. They said you could get worms from going barefooted too. Damned uncivilized place, seems to me.

Still pondering the savage ways of Mississippians, she turned off the bathroom light and tiptoed back across the room toward the chair by the window. Gotta be sure to put my shoes on before I get outside. Then a more serious thought struck her as she glanced with horror toward the fat man who was still snoring on the bed. One monstrous hairy arm was hanging over the side. A grimy paw with fat pudgy fingers hung at the end of it, looking like a blown up rubber glove. Something shiny glinted on one finger.

Oh my God! thought Emily, he's wearing a ring. I gotta get outta here. Gotta find Dolly! She searched for her pocketbook and found the man's trousers lying under the edge of the bed. Quickly, her fingers dug through the pockets and found his billfold. She snatched a twenty from it, satisfied herself that it was empty, and tossed it aside. She crammed the money inside her pocketbook, dug out her keys, and, still clutching the man's pants, slipped outside.

Stark sunlight struck her with blinding force, viciously assaulting vision after the gloom from inside. She blinked several times, shaded her eyes with one hand, and looked around. A dull pain started somewhere in her forehead as her eyes squinted against the brilliant sunlight. She spied a blinking neon sign proclaiming its message in lights that were decidedly dull next to the sun.

Paradise Inn. Hmph, thought Emily, if that's paradise I don't want no part of it. It sure ain't been no paradise for that poor sucker in there. Well, that's what he gets for laying up sleeping half the day. Cheating on

his wife. And he ain't gonna get home for a while. Nope, not him. Not'less he's anxious to run off bare-bottomed in the broad daylight. She grinned to herself, showing her crooked teeth to the sun.

At that moment she spotted the car. The ancient Buick Electra sat dismally on its worn and weary tires, stretched out like a long black serpent dozing lazily, basking in the warmth of the sun. She started toward the car, paused a moment beside a large shrub, and stashed the trousers deep inside it, out of sight to any unsuspecting eye.

Reaching the car she groaned out loud. Oh Dolly! There she was, stretched out on the car seat in a grotesque, unnatural position. Her head was at a right angle to her body. Her legs were bent double with her knees sticking straight up. Her old faded dress was wadded up around her waist, and her big hairy legs were shining all the way to her thighs. Her dingy underwear was showing too. Disgustedly, the thought occurred to Emily that Dolly never did care how she looked. She just ain't got no class, she thought. Hell! Now she's gonna be grumpy for sure for having to sleep in the car.

"Dolly," Emily's voice came out sharp and harsh. "Dolly. Get up!" Emily opened the car door and shook her roughly. She tossed her pocketbook onto the pile of their belongings in the back seat. "Dolly! Get up now. We gotta get outta here," she hissed. "Come on now. We gotta go or we're gonna get shot for sure!"

"Shot!" Dolly sat bolt upright with a shriek. "Who's gonna shoot us, Emily? Who'd wanna shoot us anyway?" She whined.

"Nobody, Stupid! 'Cause we're not gonna be here. Now scoot over and let me in."

Dolly scooted and Emily jumped in beside her and started the car. She steered it out onto the highway. Glancing at the gas gauge, she noticed that it was almost empty. The buildings along the road were becoming scarce. She decided they must be headed out of town. There would be enough gas to get them to the next town. Besides, she thought, ole loverboy's wife might be out hunting him right now. Somebody might recall seeing us. Especially with Dolly sprawled out in the car like she was all night. That was a pretty sight all right! With that thought, she glanced over at Dolly who, she realized, hadn't spoken a word since they had left.

"What's the matter with you?"

Dolly continued to stare sullenly out the window, but her lower lip hung a little lower at this attention from Emily. One big tear slid from the corner of her eye, traced a shiny path down her cheek, and dripped off her chin.

"All right. What are you pouting about this time?" Emily asked, her tone a little more gentle than before.

"I'm not stupid," Dolly blurted out. "Why'd you call me stupid? You know I don't like it when you talk to me that way," she finished in a pathetically wounded voice.

"Oh, is that all? You know I didn't mean it. I was just excited. I was scared too. Hey, you know, when I first come out to the car and saw you, I thought you was dead!"

Dolly stole a cautious sideways glance from her still lowered lids.

"Yeah," said Emily, "you looked like you was dead and gone to heaven a-laying there in that seat all sprawled every which a-way. And your big fanny was shining like a new moon!"

"NO!" said Dolly, pretending unsuccessfully to be shocked. She could scarcely disguise her delight. "In heaven? Did you really think I was dead, Emily? Were you scared?"

"Well, sure I was. But I didn't have time to think about it too much. I knew we better hit the road before the john's wife come a-hunting him and seen us sneaking away. 'Cause then we might both be dead. But he ain't goin' nowhere for a while 'cause that man's pants is laying under the bushes back at that paradise place. And look what I got besides."

Emily reached into the back seat and retrieved the pocketbook from the top of the pile and shoved it toward Dolly who pounced on it like an eager child and tore it open. She found the money and chortled gleefully.

"Hee, hee Emily, you devil! Taking that poor man's money and--and hiding his pants--and you thought I was dead and--," she was laughing so hard she broke off gasping for air, and then went into another spasm of giggles.

Emily sat back with a big smile on her face, quite satisfied with herself for getting Dolly into good humor. Dolly recovered from her giggling fit and they sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. Dolly began to fiddle with the radio and suddenly found a station. The voice of a preacher boomed over the air, exploding into the car, shouting something about hellfire and damnation. The smile melted from Emily's face. In her head a vision sprang up unbidden, from some dark forgotten corner of her mind--a vision of a small girl with her daddy standing over her screaming about God's justice.

"Christ! Dolly, turn that thing off! Hell, that's all that's on Sunday morning in this damned place. You'd think it was inhabited be a pack of devils and nothing more, the way they're always preaching day and night. Pack of lies anyway, nothing but a pack of lies," she finished vengefully.

Then, "I was good one time. I was so good and young and innocent and pure and good. You know, Dolly, I was. Never got none of them rewards they're always talking about. Never got nothing but a hard way to go, or a beating. Had to go to bed hungry 'cause I didn't bow my head low enough or say my prayers loud enough or ask God's divine forgiveness often enough. Forgiveness for what, for Christ's sake? Hadn't done nothing then."

"Forgive me, Lord!" she shouted. "Forgive me, lord, for I know not what I do!" Her laughter rose hysterically, then died abruptly, as if someone had knocked the wind out of her. When she spoke again, her voice was hushed and solemn.

"So now I guess I'm bad, Dolly. I don't know. Can't tell no difference whether I'm good or whether I'm bad. Life's always the same. Never no better, never no worse. Life treats me just the same. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it ain't. God don't care one way or another. You know, Dolly?"

"Yeah," Dolly's voice came as always, right on cue, only vaguely comprehending what she was agreeing to. "Yeah, Emily, it don't matter at all. You are absolutely right. You're the only one ever spoke the truth." Dolly fell silent again.

As if all her energy had poured out during her outburst, Emily sat clutching the steering wheel, staring grimly ahead at the empty stretch of road.

After a while, Dolly spoke again. Never able to spend much time in deep or serious thought, her mind had turned to more important things--her stomach.

"Emily. Emily, I'm hungry. Let's take some of this money and get something to eat.' Dolly was always hungry.

But Emily wasn't even listening anymore. She was lost somewhere inside her head.

Inside the small cafe, there were only the mid-afternoon regulars, drinking coffee and discussing the sorry state of things and politics and gossip. The waitress who lounged in a booth nearby was wiping silverware and listening idly to brief snatches of their conversation.

Damned dumbass men! Ain't they got nothing better to do? Wish they'd go and do nothing somewhere else. Man! I'll be so glad to get outta this town. Once they know the truth about me I'm finished here anyway. The way gossip flies, it won't be long till it reaches the ears of the fine upstanding folks of the town. Well, come tomorrow they won't be seeing me anymore. I am gonna be free! Free of this job, free of this place, and free of these men with their leering grins and hungry eyes and stupid talk. She raised a hand to brush a strand of hair that had fallen forward on her face. Her fingers brushed the purplish bruise that covered one eye. She winced with pain and the aching memory of how it had gotten there. Her movement attracted the attention of one of the men.

"That's shore some shiner you got there, Cassie. You and your--uh boyfriend have a little tiff last night?"

She turned to face the man who had spoken, shooting him a venomous glare.

Urged on by the snickers of the other men, he continued, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Well, don't take it too hard, honey, we understand how it is. Some women just need to be knocked around ever once in a while, just to keep 'em in line. You always was a feisty little thing."

The men guffawed loudly at this, their obscene laughter engulfing her and pulling her down into its depths. She glared at them, seething with contempt, fighting hot tears which threatened to spill over at any moment. Her jaw hardened as she clenched her teeth and swiped angrily at her good eye. I'll be damned if I let them see me cry.

The man was speaking again. He reached toward her with a grimy, grease-stained hand, little lines of black showing beneath the ends of the nicotine-yellowed fingernails.

"Aw, come on, honey. We was just jokin'."

She regarded the outstretched hand as if it were a snake, her eyes wide with revulsion. Her grip tightened on the knife she had been wiping, her knuckles showed white and tense as the expression on her face. The man dropped his hand, eyeing her warily. She jumped to her feet, upsetting the tray of silverware. Its contents spilled across the hard tiled floor sending up a series of thin, metallic clangs, shattering the pregnant tension between Cassie and the men. She bolted for the kitchen.

Behind her the men laughed uneasily and the man who had spoken before launched into a tale he recollected about how Cassie had whipped old Dan Majors' boy when they were in the fourth grade.

"...and when the little young'un got home, Dan whupped 'im agin fer lettin' a girl beat 'im."

They all laughed once more and picked up their conversation about the price of soybeans and the going rate for hogs.

In the kitchen the other waitress, Erma, rushed up to where Cassie was standing, her eyes closed and her head leaned back against the door frame.

"What in the world happened out there?" she queried.

"I...I dropped the silverware," Cassie mumbled.

Eyeing her suspiciously, Erma guessed that it was more than that. "Well, go pull yourself together, honey. I'll go get it up for you."

Gratefully,Cassie retreated to the bathroom. She could still hear their voices echoing inside her head. The man's rambling had brought a painful flood of memories that swirled around her like the muddy waters of the Mississippi and threatened to drown her in its ugliness. God, how I hate them. How I hate them all! All my life trying to push me into a hole where I don't fit and when I didn't just pop into it they just pushed a little harder.

And the boys. All those boys they were always trying to fix me up with. All the boys with their pawing hands and beer breath and pimply faces. Faces, Lisela's face. Her beautiful, pale little face. Her face covered with ugly purple blotches, bruised and swollen. Oh my God! She screamed silently. God help me! Answer me! She sobbed and covered her face with her hands, trying not to see for the thousandth time the horror of the scene with Lisela's father.

He had come upon them sitting by the lake. Lisela's head was cradled in her lap. They were making plans to go away together come Sunday night. He had appeared from nowhere shrieking and shouting and spitting curses at them. She had called on God then, too. But he said that God didn't answer the likes of her. She laughed bitterly now at the thought of his frustrated fury and the sight of his tortured face. He hadn't even known what name to brand her with! He struck her viciously and turned on Lisela. Cassie jumped, startled at the banging on the door.

"Cassie. Cassie honey. Are you all right?" Erma's voice brought her back to the present. The raging flood receded. Her protective armor fitted around and her mask in place once more, she walked out of the bathroom as if nothing had happened at all.

In the dining room she was relieved to find that the men had left. She cleared away the coffee cups and went to start a fresh pot of coffee. She first noticed the old car when it pulled into the service station next door. She thought absently that it must be from out of town, she didn't recall having seen it before. It was the kind of car you wouldn't forget. It looked like it might have been black about a million years ago. Now it was a dark, dull void sort of color. As the car pulled up in front of the cafe, Cassie noticed that its two inhabitants didn't look much better.

Two women got out and headed toward the front door. They were both middle-aged, but one of them had a strange sort of childish innocence about her face. Cassie realized that the woman was simple-minded. The other one was wearing a hideous looking blond wig. As the two neared the counter, Cassie could smell their cheap perfume.

God! she thought disgustedly, these two can't be for real. The blond was saying something.

"We's, ah, like to speak to the manager."

"Well, if you'll just tell me what it is you want, maybe I can help you."

"Well, we really need to speak to the manager," the woman repeated insistantly.

"All right. Wait right here." Cassie left and reappeared shortly with the manager close behind her.

"Yes?" he said, "what is it that I can do for you?"

"Well," Emily began in her most dignified manner and ladylike voice. She proceeded to tell him a pitiful concocted tale about why they had no money, "...and we were wondering if you'd be kind enough to let us order lunch. We'll sure send you payment for it later if you'll just write down the address and how much it costs." She gave him her gruesome smile in her most winning manner and stared straight into his eyes.

The manager recoiled slightly and glanced at the other woman who was looking at him quite hungrily.

"Sure," he said gruffly. "All right. Tell the waitress what you want." He turned abruptly and walked away.

Cassie took their order. They wanted sandwiches, french fries, and large cups of black coffee. She turned and busied herself sacking the food. The blond had been looking at her bruise with what she supposed was her version of a sympathetic expression. She looked like she was going to say something about it. God! The last thing I need is sympathy from her!

She placed the food on the counter and began adding it up.

"Thank you so much, ma'am. Isn't her hair pretty, Dolly?"

It was the blond speaking. Cassie looked up briefly. Their eyes met and just for a second she sensed a sort of kinship, an understanding behind the weary, ageless gaze.

Relief enveloped her when they left. As they were backing away from the curb, Cassie noticed an old tag on the front of their car. It was so dirty she could hardly make out the words. Then, as if the muddy film were not there at all, she suddenly deciphered its message--EVE WAS FRAMED.

She heard her own laughter beginning slowly and rising, harsh and high pitched and foreign sounding. It was as if she were outside her body, watching and listening to a stranger, laughing and laughing. Then, the laughter stopped; silence descended. She stood perfectly still. Suddenly she knew. She would never be free. Her frustrated longing, her insatiable hunger for understanding, her eternal search would never end. But somehow it didn't matter much anymore. Nothing mattered except that she knew.

She stood staring after the car long after it had disappeared. Erma found her standing there;a strange smile was upon her lips and all the sadness in the world was in her eyes.

THE KUDZU CAPER
by
Russell Morgan
(Meridian Junior College)
3rd Short Story, 1981

I am, at this very moment, staring at a pile of forms that need to be filled out. Damned if it's not big enough to give me a hernia should I get the wild idea to pick it up. It used to not be this bad. I mean, we're not just talking about the usual 922FA-J52a/B forms; they're over there in what I now call "Pile A." Nope, these are something entirely new to me: the 470 A34-F55t/J's, not to mention my old favorites, the 845FD7-220F/B's, which are required on all forms to help keep track of the stuff on file. That's what the "FD" stands for: Filing Designation. They're in "Pile B."

Anyway, I wouldn't have to do all of this paperwork if it weren't for last week. I was lounging comfortably behind my cluttered desk, thinking about going to lunch, pretty much like I'm doing now. As far as excitement goes, things around the Disaster Control Center leave a lot to be desired. It's a small, one-man operation funded sparingly by the local government with Federal matching funds, and small because there aren't that many disasters to take care of around here. It's hundreds of miles to the nearest large body of water, which eliminates floods and except for an occasional thunderstorm, the weather pretty much behaves itself since we're surrounded by mountains. I guess the last disaster we had was about four years ago when Old Lady Milton had a heart attack and drove her DeSoto through the Piggly-Wiggly downtown.

All of the non-disasters we have around here leave me a lot of minimum-waged free time to catch up on my crossword puzzles. Oh, every once in a while I'll read a comic book or something or maybe flip through a Field and Stream magazine, but it's pretty much crossword puzzles for me. Sometimes, if I feel up to it, I'll do some of those unscramble-the-word things. Most of the time, though, I just think about going to lunch. I was deliberately ignoring a large stack of paperwork (what I now call "Pile A": the old 922FA-F52a/B's) which was supposed to be on the city manager's desk by the next day--something about renewal of funds; nothing important. What city is complete without a Disaster Control Center? Of course, if anything major were to happen, the Federal Government would step in and the city would just be paying me to stay out of the Fed's way. Therefore, if no disasters happen, I have nothing to do, and if we do have a disaster, I have nothing to do either. I do love my job.

As I was saying, though, I was thinking about going to lunch. It was only 11:30, but I wasn't too anxious to get started on that paperwork. It was more or less just a formality anyway, because I was pretty much guaranteed the funds. The city council likes to tell the people that we have a Disaster Control Center, even if it isn't good for anything (something to do with giving the people confidence in their government). Of course, the funds aren't much, and I'm pretty sure there's some misappropriation going on somewhere, because my office is a run-down building right on the city limits, where it's out of the way. Every once in a while, some reporter starts out to do an expose on fund misappropriation and he usually targets my beloved DCC. But some enterprising henchman from the mayor's office usually manages to put him off the scent or makes another topic seem attractive.

But anyway, I was thinking about going to lunch. Usually I hop in the old Disaster Control Center station wagon and ease on over to Judy's Place and grab some of her famous roast beef sandwiches (I've always had the feeling that they tasted suspiciously of soybeans). The city council doesn't like me to drive around in the station wagon too much as it has Disaster Control Center written all over it and has a yellow light on the roof. They keep telling me to keep a low profile and to use it only for business purposes, but since we hardly ever have any business, I take it to lunch to sort of keep the battery from going dead. It rides pretty good; it's only about two years old and has hardly ever been used. I'm pretty sure that there was some funds-shuffling going on there too; the city manager's brother just happens to own a Chevy dealership over by the feed store.

23

Anyway, about lunch. Old Judy can fix a mean roast beef sandwich, except when every once in a while you bite down on a soybean and almost break a tooth. It's not too bad, though, if you drown it pretty good with ketchup. I remember one time about four years ago, right after Old Lady Milton croaked, a TV station from Rock City, KJAW, came over and did a remote interview of me right there at Judy's Place. When I was watching myself on the news that

night, I noticed that I had some ketchup on my nose. It was pretty embarrassing. Some of the guys over at Animal Control still kid me about it.

Anyhow, I was on the verge of getting up and going over to Judy's Place when I heard a truck screech to a halt outside my office. I was thinking of maybe pretending like I wasn't in or something, but I was pretty bored and it was too early for lunch, and I wasn't too interested in doing that paperwork. I put my crossword puzzle in my desk and grabbed a pen and tried to look like I was doing the paperwork (in case it was the city manager or somebody).

It wasn't. It was some jerk wearing a CAT cap and about three days' growth of beard. Up under his ancient overalls, which revealed that he could have stood to lose about thirty pounds around the gut, he was wearing a red-checkered flannel shirt. He was panting hard and it took him a few minutes to speak. Mostly he just wheezed and said, "Big...green...house...covered!"

I stood up, trying to look important. "Calm down there, boy! What seems to be the problem?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you!"

"Great, then there's no need to. I was on my way to lunch."

He shook his head wildly. "NO, NO! You've got to come out to the farm! It's completely swallowed the house and the barn!"

I assumed that maybe the dam had busted on his pond or something and his house had been flooded. "Just calm yourself, son. I'll call city maintenance, and they'll take some pumps out to your place."

"Don't need pumps! Need men; lots of me--we gotta stop it! We gotta kill it! Axes, yeah! And knives, chain saws!"

"Now just calm yourself, boy, you're delirious. You want a Coke or something? Some asprin?" I was amused that he would try to empty water with cutting tools. I figured he must've been smoking some of that wacky-tobacky.

Again he shook his head. "No asprin! I can't believe it? It must've been that new chemical treatment I gave it. It grew so big!" He held up his hands as far as they would go to indicate that something was pretty big. These country boys'll smoke anything.

"All right, son, lemme get this straight; you put some chemicals on something and it grew and covered your house and your barn. Is this one of those hidden camera things?" I figured that that's what it must've been. Either that or he was just wasted.

"NO, NO! It's kudzu! It swallowed my house!"

"Kudzu!" I was vaguely familiar with the vine which covered quite a bit of the surrounding county. The boys over at Environmental Control planted the stuff to keep the sides of the road from washing away after a rain.

"Yeah, kudzu. I planted some about a month ago to keep my backyard from washing away so bad. I fertilized it so that it'd hurry up and grow. I went up to see my brother in Rock City for a month and when I came back, it had covered my house!"

I sat back down. "Why didn't you go to Environmental Control?"

"I did, but they were closed; the government's auditing them. They said they'd be shut down for at least a week and for me to come here."

I nodded numbly. A government audit. I was probably next. But anyway, I decided to go ahead and help out this poor sucker (it might look good to the Feds). "Okay, boy, tell ya' what. Give me the directions to your place and I'll race over to Environmental Control and get some literature on kudzu and meet you out there."

"Better bring some chain saws," he said as he wrote the directions to his farm across one of the thirteen forms that I was supposed to give to the city manager." If you get lost," he continued, "just ask somebody where Larry Boatner's place is."

I grabbed a handful of 5930F17c-12F/I's (departure forms) and we left at the same time, him in his beat-up pickup and me in my DCC station wagon. After I threw the forms in the floorboard, I even turned the light on. It was the first time I had ever done that in the line of duty. I went over to Envir-

onmental Control, but they were closed up tighter than Dick's hatband, so I decided to drive over to the County Extension Office. I was enjoying the ride around town with everybody staring in amazement at my flashing yellow light.

The guy at the Extension Office was real nice and gave me a wad of literature about kudzu big enough to choke a horse, which inspired me to stop by Judy's Place and choke down a roast beef while I read over the stuff.

Judy's Place wasn't too crowded, even for noon, so I grabbed a booth over by the jukebox where I'd have room enough to spread out all the reading stuff. Old Judy asked me if I was going back to high school or something and I told her yeah, that I was studying to be a doctor. She just snorted and chunked my roast beef and my tea in front of me. I began to eat and read those little government pamphlets.

I found out that it was imported from Japan in 1876 to decorate their pavilion in our centennial fair. That came from Living With Kudzu. It went on to say that, in the 1930's, it was used a lot for erosion control, "porch vine," and covering up junk piles and wrecked cars. In another pamphlet, number EC-203 Kudzu: Friend or Foe?, I found out that kudzu can grow a foot a day and as much as a hundred feet in the summer. It has no natural enemies here in the South and so it grows kind of wild all over everything. Some vines have been measured up to twenty-five miles long. I finished my roast beef, occasionally hitting a soybean, and decided to head on out to Larry's place.

A little while later, I turned off the highway onto what looked like a deer trail and began to look for Larry's farm. I spied an old man on a backhoe, digging a ditch beside the road. I pulled up beside him and rolled down the window as he cut off his motor. "Excuse me; I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to Larry Boatner's place?"

The old man spit a wad of chewing tobacco in his newly dug ditch. "Yep. Drive on the way yer goin' fer about a mile till ye' git to a fork in the road and take a right. Go on down a ways till ya' pass the hull of a '59 Edsel sittin' under an oak tree. 'Bout a mile past that, you'll see a big green blob; that's Lar's place." He broke out in a fit of uncontrollable cackles. He spit again and between cackles he said, "Tried to tell the ass 'bout fertilizin' that kudzu!" He cackled again and cranked his back-hoe. I tried to thank him over the racket, but he couldn't hear me. He spit as I drove off.

Sure enough, down the road a ways, past the Edsel, there was a big green blob sitting beside the road. It sorta reminded me of a movie I saw once down at the Bijou. It was about this stuff that this guy grew in his refrigerator that began to attack everybody. I pulled up in front of it and stopped. Larry was there waiting for me as I got out of the wagon. "See what I mean?" He pointed behind him.

I saw what he meant all right. The house was completely covered with the vine; even the windows were covered up so thick I couldn't see through them. I saw that he had chopped a way through the front door. Behind the house there was a small green blob which looked like it might have been an outhouse. I also saw a tractor-shaped blob about twenty feet from where we were standing. And, of course, the barn was covered up off behind the house.

"Yeah, I see." Just then, I became aware of some rustling in the vines up by the front porch; it seemed like something was trying to get out from under it.

"Well, what can you do about it?" Larry didn't seem to notice the rustling.

To be honest, I really didn't know what to do. The only other disaster I had been to, when Old Lady Milton cashed in her chips, it was just a matter of turning it over to the police, but I figured that this was just a little bit out of their jurisdiction. "I don't know; let me flip back through this pamphlet." The rustling increased and something began growling and making a chomping sound.

"I would have cleared up a little bit with the bush-hog, but as you can see, it ain't in working order right now." He gestured towards the tractor-shaped clump of kudzu.

"Yeah, I see that." The rustling suddenly stopped.

"Well, does that there pamphlet say any thing about how to get rid of it?"

"Have you considered leaving it there?"

"Leaving it there! Are you crazy?"

"No, really; it says right here that if it covers the house, it can reduce temperatures on the roof by 50 degrees."

"No kiddin'?"

"Really. That'd save you money in the summer."

"Yeah, but just look at it--I can't have people dropping by and seeing it this way. Is there anything else we can do?"

"Yeah, you could clear all of it away and spray your place with 2-4D or Tordan for five years. This stuff doesn't like to die."

"Five years! I'll go broke buying that stuff. I don't want to wait that long. What other choice do I have?"

"Well, it says right here in old EC-203 that it's great for fevers,colds, or hangovers. You drink a lot?"

"Not that much!" he said, gesturing towards the great green mound.

"Yeah, I can see what you mean. Well, in OF-155 it says that cows love it; why don't you feed it to your cows?"

"Only got two of 'em."

"I see." I flipped through another pamphlet, CV-587, to see if there was anthing else he could do to get rid of the wild weed. Finally, I spied a paragraph on page 56 that might have been the answer to his problem. "What's that tractor run on?" I pointed to the green clump of tractor.

"Used to run on diesel, but I modified it to run on methane; it's cheaper you know."

"Boy, do I! I just found the answer to your problem! It says right here in Kudzu for the Future that if you take one season's crop and put it in a digester and innoculate it with sewage, you can produce enough methane gas to power your tractor for 12,000 miles and power your house." I slammed the pamphlet shut. "My boy, you are sitting under a veritable oil well. I suggest you harvest at once and gas up the old farm."

He was dumbfounded at first, but when what I said sunk in, he couldn't thank me enough. He started shaking my hand, nearly pulling it out of the socket. All of a sudden, the rustling in the vines started again with lots of growling and thrashing about. Ole Larry was still pumping my hand, not even noticing the commotion behind him, when an old dog, who had to be at least 19 years old, stumbled out of the kudzu vines. I mean, this dog was old. All of his skin was bagging down by his ankles and his bones were sticking out all over.

He yawned and trotted lazily over to me and started gumming my leg. I guess he thought he was protecting the old place or something or that Larry wouldn't give him his Mutt Chow if he didn't put on a show. Well, Larry finally said, "Aw, don't worry 'bout him, he ain't got no teeth no way." Right then the dog sunk his vicious gums into my leg as Larry still shook my hand. "Thanks a lot, mister; I guess every cloud has a silver vining."

I choose to ignore his stupid pun and to take a kick at his stupid mutt instead."It's all in the line of duty. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have got to go fill out the thirteen 478CA34-F55t/J's which are required on all disasters."

The dog tried to climb in the wagon with me, but I give him a mouthfull of kudzu literature, slammed the door before his second attack, and drove away as fast as I could, leaving him gumming that pile of pamphlets.

Word in a small town gets around fast. The Feds decided, because of my outstanding work on the "Kudzu Case," not to close my beloved Disaster Control Center. I was over at Judy's Place celebrating with one of her famous soybeenie roast beefs. That's where the camera crew from KJAW caught me. I made a quick check of my nose for ketchup before they started filming, and then they asked me a bunch of stupid questions about kudzu and how I saved the county.

All that was last week. I've heard through the kudzu vine (as we call it now) that I'm being considered for a promotion to the state board of agriculture. Hell, I might even get a Fed job as Under-secretary of Ag. or something. You never can tell. But I guess I'd better get started on these 478CA34-F55t/J's (File 8) so I can hurry up and get to those 922FR-J52a/8's

(Pile A) before next week and maybe even before a new pile gets started. When I get to Washington, I'll have to get a secretary to handle all that crap for me.

UNCLE SIDNEY'S LAYING OUT

by

Tammy Smith

(Copiah-Lincoln

Junior College)

1st Short Story, 1982

It's a hot day in the middle of summer, 1967, and I am about five years old. As we drive down the dry gravel road, I look out the back window and see two trails of dust following our black and white Plymouth. Soon we slow down and pull into the yard of an old unpainted house. Across the road is a vast cotton field, the withered stalks somehow still holding their soft white or brown products. I recall how Uncle Sidney took me out there a couple of summers before and let me pick cotton. He can't do that now.

There are some other cars in the yard, a couple of wagons, and a rusty bicycle. The horses to the wagons are tied to a shady oak tree. Already, as I get out of the car, my feet are sweaty in their black patent shoes. We walk up the front porch steps, and I notice greenish-yellow moss growing in patches on the house. I start to rub some of it off, but Mama grabs my hand and leads me through the door.

It's dark inside. By the light from the screen door, I see old photographs of people I never knew; their faces, enclosed in curved glass within thick wooden frames, are scattered at random on the walls in the hall. I think of asking Mama why it is so dark, then I see that all the thick curtains are closed. We go in the front room where everyone is; all the aunts and uncles and cousins, many of whom I don't know, turn and look. Everyone is solemnly dressed; even I, in my navy blue sailor dress, fit in. There is a cleared-away area near the front windows. Uncle Sidney is there in his coffin, on top of a low, heavy table. Whispers of "Don't he look peaceful?" and "Just like he's asleep" seem to echo off the high, dark walls. Nearby, an old man in a shiny black suit says to another, "I hepped lay 'im out. He was easier'n most of 'em."

One of the many aunts, I assume, comes over to me. She is thin, tall, Pentecostal. She squats down to my level, and I hear her knees pop. "Have you seen Uncle Sidney yet?" she asks. I look down at my feet and shake my head. "Well, come with me, and I'll show him to you."

I take her hand and she leads me to the coffin; then she lifts me up and lets me look in. The two lamps on each end of the coffin make flickering shapes across his face, and I think I see his eyelash blink. I suck in my breath and look at the Aunt. Apparently she doesn't see, because she whispers, "He's just gone to see Jesus."

Then I notice what he is wearing. "Why does he have on his overalls?" I ask, puzzled. Grandaddy Harrell wore his Sunday suit when he was buried.

The Aunt looks at me and smiles. "Well, that's what he wanted. He wanted to go see Jesus in his overalls, he said, 'cause that's what Jesus always seen him in!"

The explanation is satisfactory; in fact, I don't blame him. Going to see Jesus is probably a long, hard trip, and everyone doing it wouldn't want to be uncomfortable--"Does he have on his shoes?" I ask.

"Ah--yes, he does," the Aunt says, shifting me on her hip.

"What kind?" I persist.

"His everyday shoes," she answers, finally putting me on the floor.

"That's good," I reply. At least he doesn't have to contend with patent leather shoes, I add to myself.

Just then, Mama comes to me. "Hello, Nora," she says to the Aunt."Melissa, this is your cousin Nora. You knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes ma'am," I say, half truthfully. I did know that she must be related to me. While Mama and Cousin Nora talk about how bad it is and how they're going to miss Uncle Sidney in the family, I wander over to the men, where Daddy is.

The old man in the shiny suit is talking. "Now, I had one, one time, that did give me a problem," he tells. "Fell dead on his face, an' when they found 'im out in the field, he was already plumb cold. An' his right arm was bent up to his chest, an' they couldn't move that arm fer nuthin'. Looked funny thataway, y'know. So when I got there they asked me what t'do. I didn't really know, myself; wouldn't move for me, neither. So I figgered, why don't we just put his clothes on with 'im like that, and put a big purty bunch o' posies in his hand, an' leave it like it is. And so that's what I did."

"Worst 'un I ever did have to do was this girl an' her baby. 'Course, that was before all this hospital an' funeral home doin's--now them, they'll take a pore man fer an arm an' a leg, and don't care no more 'bout you then they would that crack in th' floor. Well, 'bout this girl an' her little ol' baby. Girl wasn't no more'n fourteen years old--" then he sees me and suddenly stops. I go over to Daddy and stand by him.

"That'un yours, Curtis?" another old man says. Daddy nods. The old man kneels down and pats my head. "I'm your Uncle Melvin. You remember your Aunt Cora Mae, don't cha? Well, I'm Uncle Melvin."

I nod, Aunt Cora Mae used to wear overalls, too. She wore her hair short and drove a log truck. This Uncle Melvin, her husband, was notorious in Mama's book; she still says it was Uncle Melvin who drove Aunt Cora Mae to her grave. She doesn't have anything to do with him. I stretch my neck, making sure Mama doesn't see him talking to me. She doesn't.

The old man in the shiny suit smiles at me. "I can tell where you got that purty red hair."

I grimace, as usual. "I don't like it," I tell him. They all very quietly laugh, a laugh that is reserved for funerals and before church time.

Mama comes to the group. "Come here," she says, taking my hand. "Aunt Winnizell wants to see you."

Aunt Winnizell is a big, tall woman. She looks strong enough to carry Uncle Sidney's coffin by herself. Her snowy white hair is carefully bunned in the back and is held by tortoise shell combs, and her mouth is one pale little line. She looks me over critically, her Indian nose occasionally quivering. "Well," she finally announces, "she does have pretty red hair at least."

Mama fiddles with my collar and smooths my hair, smiling nervously. Something tells me that I shouldn't tell this one I don't like my hair. Aunt Winnizell, her verdict reached, leans back in her chair, and the seat pops loudly. I manage to tiptoe away while Mama and the other women talk about how peaceful Uncle Sidney looks and how Aunt Gracie, his widow, is taking it. Looking as inconspicuous as possible, I get past the men, out on the dog-trot, and soon I am in the kitchen. There is half of a pound cake left on the table, protected from flies by a screen bonnet, and I snitch a tiny slice. Next, I take off my shoes and my little white lace-edged anklets. Then I walk out the screen door and put my shoes and socks on the porch. An old orange and white tomcat nearby looks lazily at me and yawns, then goes back to sleep. Chickens are taking sunbaths, and I hear hogs grunting in a distant pen shaded by a fig tree. The dark, cool mud under the shelf near the well looks inviting, but I know what can happen to undertoes when mud gets to them; for seemingly no reason at all, the top layer of skin cuts open and stings badly. So I resist the temptation of the mud. I simply wander around in the lush green grass, pick some blackberries growing on the fence, and pop them into my mouth. Mama and Daddy hadn't said how long we would stay, although I know the funeral is tomorrow morning. Will we have to stay the whole night? Will I have to sleep on the floor? The prospects are dismal. I walk back to the porch and sit on the top step, daydreaming about all sorts of things: winter, the injustices of being a child, chickens, horses and wagons, growing up someday, and clouds.

Suddenly the sun begins to set. Did I go to sleep? Maybe I did. I look around (did Mama and Daddy leave and forget me?) and see Daddy looking at me through the screen door. "They're just about to eat now," he says. "You coming in?"

"Any fried chicken?" Fried chicken is staple funeral food.

"A great big pot of it," he replies and opens the door for me as I heave up. Several lamps have been lit in the kitchen, and their light reflects brightly off crinkled tin foil. Where only the pound cake remnant had been,

there is now a red-and-white checked tablecloth, almost completely covered by pots and plates and bowls. The fried chicken, potato salad, biscuits and rolls, an apple pie, the pound cake, and an iced strawberry cake cover the table like a feast. I get in line, Daddy hands me a plate and utensils, and I await my turn. When I get to the table, I see that Aunt Winnizell is presiding over the fried chicken. She starts to give me a wing, then changes her mind and plunks a drumstick on my plate.

"Thank you," I whisper as Daddy spoons a bit of potato salad on my plate. Maybe she's nice after all--yes, ma'am, a roll. Thank you. Now, which dessert do I want? I decide on the strawberry cake. All the old people are avoiding it because the tiny seeds hurt their gums. Cousin Nura hands me a Dixie cup full of iced tea. I want to go back out on the porch to eat, but mosquitoes are probably out, and their bites swell up on me. People are standing around the kitchen, out on the dogtrot, even in the bedroom, but no one goes in the front room with his food. It's as though they're afraid they might upset Uncle Sidney by eating in front of him and not offering him anything. I stand near the back door. When I realize this is too cumbersome for standing up, I simply sit down near the table on the floor and eat. It's a good thing Mama doesn't see that.

It's hard to see faces in the lamplight, and those I can see are distorted. On the wall there are huge, hunched shadows. A chill suddenly goes through my body. Someday, all of these people will be lying in coffins in front rooms, even me. The shadows begin to scare me; it's as though the shadows are the ghosts of these people, hunched over because they are coming to get me--I put my food down and run to find Mama and Daddy.

They are eating as though nothing has happened. Daddy sees my frightened face and asks me what is wrong. I can't get it out, so I start to cry. All the surrounding aunts start asking what's wrong and why am I crying, and Mama reaches over and picks me up on her lap. "I think she's just tired. We'd better be going soon, anyway," she says. When the aunts are sure nothing is wrong and turn away, Mama whispers, "Shame on you! A big girl like you, crying!" There is no comfort to be found, I see, so I screeble down and go back to the kitchen out on the porch and get my shoes and socks.

When I come back, Mama and Daddy are telling everyone goodbye and goodnight. Mama grabs my hand and leads me out the front door, a pie plate in her other hand. "What was the matter with you in there?" she whispers. I still can't tell her, so I say nothing.

The horses snort as we walk by them. I look at the cotton field, silver in the moonlight, and think about the dead man whose arm wouldn't move. I feel that chill again, but that's all. I ask Daddy, "Who's gonna pick cotton now?"

"I suppose one of the boys will," he sneers as he opens the car door. The "boys" are about his age. We get in, and he starts the motor. The horses neigh at the sudden noise, and we are once again on the dusty gravel road. Tomorrow morning we will come back for the funeral, but for now I look back through the rear window at the silver cotton bolls in the field until they are out of sight.

BEAUTIFUL SWIMMER
by
Elaine McDermott
(Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College--
Jefferson Davis Campus)
1st Place Poetry, 1982

Trapped in my baited net,
You wind your angry claws
Through rope and wire.

I tug it quickly
Through the salty water
Over the splintered rail.

Tossed in the wooden bushel,
You extend your sapphire claw,
Making your fury known.

Your placid pals feel your pinchers
As you climb their cowardly backs
And fall crawling to the pier.

Scuttling along the battered planks,
You splash downward to the Sound.
I watch, tied to the boundaries of my net.

MAGNOLIA BLOSSOM
by
Lisa Winters
(Northeast Mississippi
Junior College)
2nd Short Story, 1982

"Amanda!" Etta Green called from the front porch, "Amanda, child, where are you hiding now?" Mrs. Green gave another half-hearted glance around the front yard and decided to return to her sewing. "You better not be up in that old tree again, or you'll get a lickin' from your grandaddy!" she called as she shut the screened door.

From high up in the old magnolia tree, Amanda watched her grandmother close the door and go back into the decaying mansion. She knew her grandmother had known good-and-well where she was all the time. Etta had just yelled the warning about being in the tree for her husband's sake. Since Amanda had fallen out of the tree the previous summer and broken her arm, Grandpa Green had forbidden her to even climb a tree again.

Amanda wasn't one to obey rules, however, so she usually did just what she wanted, regardless of her grandparents' wishes. The magnolia tree was her haven, and she wasn't going to give up her time spent in solitude among the leaves, drinking in the sweet fragrance of the tree's flowers. How Amanda loved the magnolia blossoms!

Her grandparents thought it strange that she preferred a tree to the house or the yard. They didn't understand that she needed the peacefulness of the magnolia tree. She could think there. Most of her relatives thought she was strange; like her grandparents, they didn't understand her. Amanda had often heard them remark, "She's too much like Iris was at that age, so rebellious, and so smart!" Others had said, "Iris had so much brains it'd just scare you sometimes! What a shame she turned out like she did. Just too pretty for her own good I guess."

One day Amanda asked her grandmother who Iris was. But Etta just replied, "Iris is a person you'd be better off knowing nothing about."

Later Amanda found some old pictures in a trunk in the attic that partly answered her questions. One was of a little girl with long, blonde curls. She had her arm around a smaller, dark-haired girl, who was wearing an outfit identical to that of the bigger girl. Written on the back was--Iris, age 6 and Etta, age 4; 1885. There were other pictures of the same beautiful blonde-haired girl--Iris, age 10--Iris at her "Sweet Sixteen" Party. Amanda quickly thought, "Iris must be Grandma's sister! But why have I never seen or heard of her before?" Just then her grandmother opened the attic door. "Grandma," Amanda quickly asked, "who is Iris? I found these pictures. She's beautiful! Is she your sister?"

"She was once my sister; at the time those pictures were taken she was. Now put those pictures up and come down to supper immediately!" Etta turned and tromped loudly down the stairs. Amanda remembered just sitting there for a long time wondering why it made her grandmother so mad to have Iris even mentioned.

She was still wondering when she realized that she was leaning closer and closer to the edge of the limb. She scooted herself into a safe, comfortable position and let her mind wander back to the mysterious Iris. "I know she is--or was--Grandma's sister. And I know that she is a lot like me, or that's what people say. But why is she such a secret?"

Her thoughts were intruded upon by a loud crack of thunder sounding in the distance. "It'll rain tonight," she said aloud. "Tomorrow morning magnolia blossoms will be all over the yard. Rain always makes them fall off. Then Grandpa will walk out on the porch, just like always, and say, 'Them flowers look just like snow out there, what a sight!' Then he'll stretch and yawn, and say, 'Mm-mm! Just smell that magnolia sing.' I don't know why he calls it that." Amanda concluded to herself.

The wind blew a long blonde braid across her face. Amanda brushed it back and continued thinking about the rain. She visualized a cold, dark, rainy day-

-abundant with thunder and lightning. A sad, lonely figure was walking down the driveway, her tears mixing with the rain. She stopped occasionally to glance at the house on the hill. A suitcase weighted down each arm, and the rain was soaking her to the bone. Amanda called out, "Wait, Iris, don't leave!" The figure vanished and the little girl jumped when she realized that it wasn't raining at all and that she had let her imagination carry her away. "I hope she didn't really leave like that," Amanda thought sincerely. "That's too corny for real life anyway. Maybe she left to find fame and fortune, or to travel with the circus or something like that. Whatever the reason, I just hope she is happy now. Just wish I could know more about her." Careful searches of the house had revealed nothing of Iris or her actual existence, except the pictures in the attic and the Family Bible.

Amanda pictured the big Family Bible in her grandmother's room. On the page between the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, and the First book of the New Testament, Matthew, was drawn a big Family Tree. On the page was a big, ornate tree with more branches than Amanda had ever seen on any tree in her life. On each branch, in descending order, was listed a member of Amanda's family on her grandmother's side, the Palmers. Then there was a fresh branch started when Etta married her husband, Bud Green. Down at the very bottom was her very own name, Amanda Louise Green. But up above her grandmother's name, about middle-ways, was a big scribble mark. She knew now that her great-aunt's name had once been on that branch. Someone had scribbled her name out though, as if trying to erase her completely from the family.

"My magnolia tree would make a much prettier family tree than that one in Grandma's Bible." Amanda though smugly. "No tree has that many branches!" She sat there thinking of why on earth people would write generations of a family on a tree anyway. It didn't make sense to her. "Oh well, I'd rather think about Iris."

Amanda imagined Iris as a little girl, running in the yard--playing games with Etta. The house was white then, not the peeling gray one that Amanda knew. The sunken steps and saggin' columns were wonderfully new looking too. "I bet Iris used to sit here in this very tree, just like I do. Maybe that's why people didn't like her." Amanda reasoned. "They don't understand why I come here either." Amanda thought for a long time, mulling over her new theory. "Yep, I bet she sat here a lot. Just listenin' to the birds, watchin' clouds, thinking about important things, and smellin' the magnolia blossoms. She seems like the kind of person who would like this sort of thing, just like I do." Amanda let her thoughts be still for a while, so she could watch a dark cloud that looked like a fuzzy black cat float by . "Wherever you are, Iris, I bet you sure do miss this old tree."

Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice calling her. "Amanda! Amanda Louise Green, you come to supper right now!" Her grandmother shouted. "I've done called you three times." There was still no reply from her granddaughter. "I know you're up in that tree."

"Be right there, Grandma!" Amanda answered quickly. She started to climb down, but a sudden thought stayed her. She got out her pocketknife, the one Grandpa Green had given her last Christmas, and began carving a letter on the branch she was seated on. "I," she said as she finished the first letter, and then went on to the second one, "R."

The screen door on the front porch banged open. Grandma Green was angry. "Amanda come down from there this minute! And stop and get you a switch before you come in, too!"

"S," Amanda said as she finished the last letter. Then she called to her grandmother, "I'm a'ca'in. I'm coming now." She looked at the word that would now be imprinted on that tree forever--IRIS--and she smiled smugly. "That's much better than that old branch in the Bible anyway."

As Amanda climbed down from the tree, she felt very satisfied with herself. When she reached the bottom she started to cut a switch, but decided to give her grandmother a chance to change her mind. A swift breeze was blowing, and it smelled like rain. A solitary blossom floated down from the huge magnolia and landed at Amanda's feet. "If that's your way of saying thank you," Amanda said to the silent tree, "then you're welcome. Now Iris will always be a part of this family." She turned then and ran to the house for supper.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

by
Deloris Moore
(Mississippi Delta
Junior College)

1st Informal Essay, 1983

Although much has been written in drama, story, and song about the plight of black people in rural areas earlier in the century, the only ones who actually understand what it was like are those who lived through those times. There were, indeed, some good days, but many were bleak. Trouble seemed to hover constantly, and despair was all too present. It always surprises me, now, when I reflect on it, that we were often worried but rarely bitter.

When I was a little girl, I lived on a small farm called Dorsey Groves. About six families occupied the shot-gun houses that stood two miles apart. The floors and walls were built with two-by-fours and wide planks, causing the floors to squeak with the slightest footstep. In the entire house were only three windows that made a constant rat-tat-tat whenever a wind came. We covered the walls with white flowered paper turned yellow from the smoke of the wood heater and supplemented in spots with sheets of newspaper and pictures from catalogs or magazines to cover a bad crack or tear.

There were no supermarkets nearby, just a little country store about three miles down the dusty road. My mother and father visited the store once a week for supplies. They bought things like soap, flour, meal, seeds, and occasionally dress material. We never needed to buy fruit because the fruit trees were plentiful, and we grew our own vegetables. The soil was so rich, the vegetables grew big and beautiful.

When I was six I had to help with the chores. Like Caliban, I was the hewer of wood and the drawer of water. But with everyone pitching in, these jobs weren't so bad. Some would feed the pigs and chickens; others would bring in the fire wood that my older brother and I had cut. When the chores were done and the sun was over the trees, it was time to wash for supper in a ten gallon tub that my father had gotten from the store. After supper the children would get ready for bed. Since there were only three bedrooms for a family of seventeen, the girls shared one room and the boys another. My mother would sometimes tell a story that she had once heard from her mother--about a little girl who lived with her family in a farm house. They were very poor until a handsome prince came and took them to a beautiful castle, and they never wanted for anything ever again. The story, I'm sure, was just to give us hope because that was all we had at the time.

At dawn Father was up and on his way to work. He worked from sun up to sun down, plowing the fields and planting the cotton seeds.

Sometimes I would stand in the yard and watch him drive away on the John Deere tractor. He often had to gulp down his dinner in only thirty minutes. Although the pinto beans and corn bread were never a balanced diet, they were filling. At the end of the day he would drag himself home, covered with grit and grime from head to toe, throw himself in the ten gallon tub, wash away the grime, and force himself to sit and eat a meal that he was too tired for. At the end of the week he would wait on the front porch for the foreman to come by with his check. When the foreman passed my father the check, I could see the disappointment in his face, for it was barely enough to buy the soap to wash the clothes for the following week and a few extras. But that was o.k. It was enough for the oldest girl a pair of shoes, and my mother could get a yard of material for a dress. The other girls would trade shoes until their turns came for new ones.

From the worries and hard work, my father became ill and had to be hospitalized. At that point we didn't know exactly what to do. With the grace of God, my mother came up with a solution. She learned to drive the tractor! Father was getting better every day. Just when we thought that things were going fine, Mother's health failed. The varicose veins that stood out in her legs would not permit her to sit on the tractor all those hours, and my father's doctor wouldn't permit him to go back to work. Consequently, we had to leave the farm, since the foreman needed the house for an able-bodied man. Though neither would have understood the term "trite expression," they were both given to using them. The family was heartbroken. Mother cried, "When it rains it pours," but Father said, "Where there's a will there's a way."

A few days later we moved to a little town, where my father was still concerned because he didn't know anything except farming. All he had going for him at this point was determination. He walked half a mile to a little school and talked the principal into giving him a chance to prove himself working around the school as a janitor. When we had to leave the farm, we thought the world had come to an end, but it hadn't. Actually, things got better. We had inside plumbing! My father wasn't so tired after work that he couldn't eat his supper. Now at the end of the month when he looked at his check, there was a smile where a frown once was. He would look at Mother and say, "This is two pairs of shoes and maybe something nice for you." We would all smile and give God thanks, for we knew he had truly blessed us.

Perhaps these hardships seasoned the black families of those days and were character-building for the children. I know that our attitude was much more wholesome toward our parents, our neighbors, the community, and the world than that of many youngsters today who roam the streets to rob and rape.

Although I wouldn't want to go back to those times, they were, in a way, the good old days. Shakespeare, as usual, was right, "Sweet are the uses of adversity."

THE OLD HARP SINGING
by
Rebecca Moore
(Itawamba Junior College)
3rd Informal Essay, 1983

Memories are a part of life; they stay even if the events which inspire them discontinue. The "Old Harp Singing" at George's Chapel Church is one happy memory of my life. Begun during the middle 1800's, this event played an important part in the community where I was reared. Here many people saw each other for the only time during the entire year. They might not go to town, but they don't miss "the singing."

Dust squished between bare toes! After several dry weeks, it was inches deep in the road. Two cousins, two sisters, and I were excited as we started to the church. Today was clean-up day at the church and cemetery, and we knew that everyone would be there. We each carried a tool to help: either a rake, hoe, or mop rested on each shoulder. All the girls were happy because today all the boys would be there to help cut vines, move benches, and push the lawn mower. Shy looks, girlish giggles, and friendly faces would accent the work day.

There was already a collection of cars and pickups at the church. Barrels of water stood in one truck ready for the scrubbing of the floor and the outdoor toilet. Ladders were sticking out from another truck because the windows had to be scrubbed, too. Our steps became faster as we saw several boys already there. Everyone worked hard, side by side, until the little church began to shine. About lunch time, the boys began nailing boards between trees and placing the large barn doors loaned by neighbors across these to form long tables for eating. Huge platters of fried chicken, bowls of potato salad, and boiled corn sent beautiful scents through the yard and church. Big jars of iced tea made their appearance from cars and trucks, and everyone stopped working just long enough to eat. Then, back to work until pink streaks began to edge the sky. Tired, but happy, we all piled into cars and trucks, yelling, "See ya'll tomorrow," and hoped there would be no rain. But it couldn't rain; it wouldn't dare!

On Sunday, always the first in August, the sun didn't let us down; it was another beautiful day for "our singing." Old people came or were brought from miles around. Daddy's school teachers hugged him and us as we met for another year. Canes and wheelchairs were used by many, but this didn't hamper the voices that rose from the little church. It seemed to sway with the tunes! All the seats were filled early, but many pickups had straight-back chairs and rockers which now filled the aisles and poured over into the yard. Soon quilts and blankets dotted the grounds reminding the running children to dodge little curly heads and crawling babies.

Dishes began to cover the tables set up the day before, and once again those beautiful smells began to fill the air. Fried chicken, huge slices of ham, beef cut in large chunks, and all sorts of vegetables were displayed. Corn, beans, and plates of sliced tomatoes and cucumbers made bright spots

here and there. One table filled with fluffy coconut cakes, creamy chocolate pies, cookies, and candy especially drew all of us kids. Mouths began to water long before the older people began to come out for lunch. The singing never stopped, so everyone ate in shifts.

Drifting in and out, friends met again after a long year without seeing each other. Hugs and kisses were a part of this, and I endured many squeezes from people I'd never met before. These were Daddy's friends and relatives who soon became familiar to me. Tales of whippings he'd gotten as a boy really tickled me, for it was hard to picture Daddy getting a spanking.

Tears went with the parting, for many of these people wouldn't return next year. Always a few of these old singers died before the next singing. They were always missed and remarked about the next year, but they were never forgotten by those who attended. Last year, "the singing" was very small, only about fifteen of the old singers attended, and all wonder how long the old note singing will endure. None of us younger ones learned to sing; we just enjoyed the older ones, so it may one day die out completely. This may be one memory that may never impress itself on today's children. The death of the "old harp singing" will be hard to bear for many. Community closeness, yesterday's friends, and childhood memories wait to grieve such a loss.

FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT
by
Amy House
(Holmes Junior College)
2nd Place Poetry, 1984

From our vantage point we caught a
glimpse of him through the trees.

Poised, as if contemplating flight, his
powerful leg muscles tensed with readiness.

With each new sound his body quivered;
he listened and waited.

As the gunshot rang through the cool
morning air, he put his head down and
immediately pushed his way across the
rough ground.

Running in and out of bright
sunshine, he stretched his body to the
limit, knowing that he was being pursued.

And pursue him we did.
Up and down, through the woods, we
attempted to better his stride.
But he ran as if possessed by the wind.

Against all odds we began gaining
on him and our excitement grew with
each step we took.

Approaching him from behind, we
became aware that he was in trouble,
probably from the rough terrain rather
than the running itself.

Suddenly we were upon him, and as
suddenly he stopped and fell.
His body could stand no more.
His eyes told of his pain.

For an instant there was the urge to
help him, but it faded as we ran past
him.

Onward we ran, panting, hurting with
each step, but knowing that whatever
son, we had surpassed the best--the
champion cross-country runner.

BABY ROSE

by
Sandra Cooper
(Copiah-Lincoln
Junior College)

1st Short Story, 1984

Myra pushes against the rusty screen door as her Uncle Sam yells, "You hear 'bout that woman namin' 'er baby God?"

The warm April wind slams the sagging door back in Myra's face. Sam continues to tell Myra, his twelve-year-old great grandniece about a rockin' roll floozy naming her baby God as he and Hattie, his wife for sixty-five years, follow Myra onto their front porch. Sam Tucker loves a thunder storm more than a long nap in his favorite chair, and grumbling thunder rolling in from the west promises him a good one.

The century-old house appears ready to capsize with the next Mississippi storm. Sam and Hattie shuffle their feet along the rotting boards. Sam creeps toward the low side and Hattie moves cautiously toward the high side. Myra drags a creaky oak rocker to the center of the porch, climbs over the arm rest, sinks down in the cowhide-bottom chair and pulls her long bare legs up close to her thin body. Her father drives a truck and stops by occasionally to leave a little money and tell a big lie about how he'll be back soon to take her with him to live in Florida. The child's mother ran off to Nevada with an insurance salesman from Gulfport and left Myra at Sam and Hattie's over three years ago.

Thick black curls blow across her haunting blue eyes as she watches Sam grow more excited with each distant growl of thunder.

Myra searches the marbled skies like a hawk hunting for prey. "Look, Uncle Sam. Look at that cloud over yonder. It's just full of rain. How old are you, Uncle Sam?"

"Your Aunt Hattie and me are the same age, born two days apart, and we both pray neither one of us will have to live more than twenty-four hours without the other."

Hattie points to the Mount Zion Baptist Church across the gravel road and in a jittery voice explains, "Honey, if the church folks find out how old we really are, they'll make us move up with the old people in Sunday School and Sam and me, we're real happy right where we are with the sixty-five to seventy-year-olds. We been there twenty years and we ain't gonna promote up now. Are we, Sam Tucker?"

Sam shakes his head no. His wide grin reveals an empty mouth except for three yellowish-brown teeth, jagged as a jack-o-lantern. He sucks on a dangling tooth, runs his bony fingers through his thin white hair and moves further down the low side of the porch to inspect the tumbling clouds.

By degrees Hattie gets to the high side of the porch, and she drops heavily into a worn-out rocker to admire her snow-colored azaleas with bleeding pink centers. Bright red geraniums, purple iris and yellow daisies surround the high end of the porch, along with six old tires, an old porcelain sink, a catawba vine hunting for something to run on, a few scattered calla lillies and Hattie's own hybrid of white satin rose bushes loaded with giant buds. Nothing grows at the low side of the porch because three large oak trees block the sun. Hattie's cloudy blue eyes delight at the beauty of her hard work. But the sight of a honeysuckle vine snaking through one of her treasured azalea bushes brings her to the edge of the rocker: she plots to get rid of the killer.

Minnie, the cat, is stretched out on the top step cleaning her ragged grey ear meticulously, while her young ebony son Scram plays with fluttering leaves.

Sam calls, "Myra, come on over to my side of the porch for a minute."

Myra leaves the comfort of the droopy-bottom chair to join him. With his finger and one good eye Sam points up the gravel road that runs in front of his house. His right eye is bad and stays in the same upward position all the time. He says he can see perfect out of it, but Hattie says he is a liar, that the eye is dead blind and has been dead for more than twenty-five years.

They watch the sluggish green car, sitting low to the ground, stop in front of the cemetery. The Mount Zion Baptist Church, recently modernized with white vinyl siding, and a small decaying cemetery stare directly at Sam and Hattie's listing house.

A small whirlwind lifts dust and tiny pieces of gravel into the air, leaving grit to settle on the car and back on the rarely used road. A waving hand pops out from the driver's window of the car, but quick as a thought the hand disappears, and three large people begin to emerge.

"They not good religious folks," Sam mumbles.

Hattie leans forward in her rocker, grabs hold of the weak railing and pulls herself to her unsteady feet and fusses. "Sam, why you sayin' that? Now don't go and be mean."

"Hattie, I own the land that church is sittin' on and I own that clangless bell hangin' in that steeple. That bell belonged to my daddy's church in Belzoni, only thing that survived the 1910 church fire. And I own the land them dead is buried in so I can say anything I want to. Willie is my best friend, and there ain't nuthin' I wouldn't do for him or his wife Maudy, but they ain't good religious folks. Y'all come on. I forgot I had promised Willie I'd help him do somethin'."

They step over Minnie who refuses to move even at Hattie's harsh scolding and walk into the front yard full of old egg-laying hens. Sam stops in front of his faded blue, 1956 pickup sitting on four flat tires. Sam's son, Harold Dean, chained the truck to an oak tree near the low side of the porch over a year ago. Sam shakes his head, sucks his teeth and throws his arms in the air. His arms flail around as fiercely as the oak branches high above him.

In a loud strained voice he admits, "Now I did hit that fire hydrant in downtown Florence, but ya'll know I'm a good driver and hittin' one fire hydrant in forty years of drivin' ain't good 'nough reason to chain up a man's truck. Is it, youngun?" Myra shakes her head no and scrawls her name in the dust on the hood of the truck.

Sam's voice drops, but he is still angry. "The police and mayor completely overlooked the broken fire hydrant, but it was Miss Katie Neal Sojourner that got all upset 'cause 'er yard was flooded for a couple of days." Sam reaches out, pats his truck and sings in a nursery rhyme way, "Good ol' blue...I love you...Me and you...What we gonna' do."

Hattie tugs at Myra's arm and whispers, "He ain't the same since Harold Dean went and chained up his truck."

Sam and Hattie are grunting and panting as they enter the cemetery. Myra slows down to admire the rows and rows of yellow buttercups nodding their heads in approval. Tiny, delicate wild flowers embrace the weeds that flow into the pasture beyond the barbed wire fence separating the church and cemetery from a neighbor's pasture. A diseased pecan tree stands in the middle of the graves. Moss covers the headstones; two have fallen over and broken. The three large people stand with their backs to Sam, Hattie, and Myra.

Sam turns to Hattie, "I don't know who them two fat women are. Do you?" And then he yells, "Warm day, ain't it."

Willie turns slowly towards them and replies, "Yep, real warm."

Myra stops. In the man's weathered arms is cradled a small white casket, no bigger than a man's shoe box. A shovel leans against his bulging stomach. Myra steps closer to Willie; she is amazed at the tiny box.

Sam and Hattie carry on a conversation about Willie's disfigured hand lying across the top of the tiny casket. Willie tells them the hand's about the same and continues with the whole gruesome story of how he got it hung in a disker. They have heard the story many times, but they enjoy it once again.

Willie ends the story by telling them, "I wish it would have chewed the damn thing off."

Hattie asks who the two women are. Each wear over-washed denim dresses with no belts. They are elephantine. Their black pump shoe tops are spread out over their soles. No stockings, but matching dingy slips fall two inches below their dress hems. Their orangey-red hair matches the cow's coat that ambles along the fence. The women stare at whatever their puffy eyes fix on. Simultaneously, they fold their flabby arms under their massive bosoms and tromp soldier-like back to the car.

"They too heavy for their legs. Can't stand more than five minutes. They my baby brother's youngest girls. They twins, identical twins," says Willie.

Myra continues to stare at the mauled hand and dwarf-like casket as Sam asks, "You want to bury it here?"

"Her name is Rose, Miz Hattie. They named her after Miz Maudy's favorite flowers, the lily and the rose. Lily Rose Van Zandt. Miz Maudy is staying with the baby's mama. Baby Rose would have been our very first great-grandchild.

"That's a real pretty name, Willis," says Hattie as she dabs at tears running down her face.

Hattie holds out her arms and tells Willis, "Let me hold Baby Rose while ye'll dig the grave. They'll be plenty of shade right here for her." She puts the coffin gently and a fine mist of rain begins to dampen her hair.

"Why ain't the baby's daddy here diggin' instead of us two worn-out, half-dead mules?" laughs Sam.

"Well, the daddy done up and run off three months ago. He don't know nothin' 'bout Baby Rose being born," says Willis.

At that Hattie lets out a pitiful cry and rocks Baby Rose from side to side as if she were rocking a baby taking a late afternoon nap. The wind blows a few dead limbs from the pecan tree while the dark clouds hanging above their heads threaten them with lightning. Sam and Willis argue over who is going to dig until raindrops begin to change the smell of the late afternoon air.

Myra reaches out for the shovel, "I'll dig, Mr. Willis."

Neither one likes the idea, but Willis hands her the shovel and sits down on the ground. Sam joins him. Myra hesitates for a moment. She draws a deep breath and jumps on the shovel, breaking the soft ground. The broken earth releases a sweet wine smell as she digs deeper and deeper. Sam tells Willis he'll take over, but Willis argues he should be the one to finish so Myra continues to dig while they fuss.

Quarter-size raindrops begin to fall along with a thick mist. Hattie takes off her red-checked apron and spreads it over the casket. She uses the corner of the draped apron to wipe her eyes and nose.

Hattie whispers to Willis, "I'm goin' over to the church yard real quick to get some fresh flowers. You hold the baby."

As soon as Hattie leaves Willis sets Baby Rose on the ground next to Sam and tells them both he'll be right back. He stands up, straightens his tight overalls, peers into the roughly dug hole and says, "That's a real good job you doin', Myra. What do you think, Sam?"

Sam crawls over on his hands and knees, peers in, and agrees with Willis. "Child, I couldn't do a better job myself."

Willis helps Sam to get up off the dank cold ground while Myra, excited by their praise, digs faster. Sam and Willis offer her suggestions and their help, but Myra turns a deaf ear and continues her frantic digging.

A few minutes later, Hattie returns panting and clutching a small bunch of buttercups, one large white satin rose bud and a long stem calla lily. She stops at a grave and disposes of some dead flowers sitting in a moss-covered jar, half-full of water. With flowers and jar she returns to Sam's side. Her eyes dash around searching their arms for the casket and when she sees Baby Rose sitting on the ground she explodes.

"Willis Van Zandt, get that baby girl off the ground this instant."

In a fluster she moves toward a sick-looking Willis and in a piercing voice scolds all of them. "Just 'cause there ain't no preacher here or Christian service here, ain't no reason to be disrespectful to God's greatest treasure. Sweet child. Give that baby to me this instant."

Willis grabs Baby Rose and hands her to Hattie with his head hanging on his chest and his lip stuck out like a five-year-old child.

Myra stops digging and asks, "Mr. Willis, I think I've dug deep enough, don't you?"

"Looks alright to me. What you think, Sam?"

"Looks good to me," sniffs Sam.

Thunder jolts them into action. "Let's at least say a prayer," says Hattie.

"Alright, Miz Hattie, I'll say one," responds Willis.

"Dear Lord, we sorry you didn't see fit to let this baby, Baby Lily Rose Van Zandt, live longer than seven hours, but I guess you got your reasons. Amen."

Hattie has something different in mind and gives Willis a long hard look right after he says Amen. Sam's bad eye has been staring at Willis all through the prayer, but his good eye has been watching the storm moving in on top of them.

Willis nervously steps back, twists his mauled right hand with his left fingers and proclaims, "I can't do it."

Sam complains, "My bad back and knee just ain't gonna let me get down that far, or I'd do it."

Hattie is busy mourning for everyone. Myra lays the shovel down, wipes her hands on her wet shorts and reaches out toward Hattie for Baby Rose. Myra shivers at the touch of the cold wet metal. Willis corrects her, "Turn the baby around so 'er head won't be at the foot."

Myra prays quietly to herself, "Please, please, Lord don't let me drop 'er. If I do Aunt Hattie will surely faint." Myra drops to her knees and begins to inch Baby Rose down into the dark shelter of the earth, but she realizes she will have to lie down on the muddy ground before she will be able to set Baby Rose on the bottom. She lies down on her stomach, still holding tight to Baby Rose. "I'm straining as hard as I can, but my hands are wet and she's slipping away from me. What am I gonna' do? I don't want to just let her drop."

At the next violent flash of lightning Sam warns, "Let 'er go or they'll have to bury all of us!"

A muted thud lets them know she has reached the bottom. Sam shovels the dirt in almost before Myra can get her arms out. The tiny white casket is lost from sight. Hattie sets the moss-covered jar at the head of the grave and jams the flowers inside. Willis picks up his shovel and bellows a thank you as he runs toward the car holding the twins. The green car, leaving as reluctantly as it came, turns back up the gravel road.

All the way back to the house Sam admires the storm. Hattie shouts something about digging up one of her prize white satin rose bushes and setting it out next to Baby Rose, and Myra climbs the steps slowly letting the rain rinse away the layer of dirt covering her.

Hattie pats Sam on the shoulder, "Sam, you're a good man. I know you been sayin' that plot in the shade for yourself. It's a fine thing you did givin' that spot to that lil ol' baby. Now, I'm going to get some strong, chicory coffee goin'. We all got to get out of these wet clothes. Myra get out of the rain."

Sam sucks his teeth and grins as Hattie disappears into the unlit house. He and Myra stare at ol' blue shining in the rain.

"Uncle Sam, do you think ol' blue will start?"

"You bet ol' blue will start. She'll crank right up. I got the key to 'er. What I don't have is the key to that chain that's wrapped around 'er axle and that confounded tree."

He rubs his wet head and speaks in a pitiful, childish voice, "I'm too old to drive. I know it. I might run into another fire hydrant and the chief and mayor might not overlook it next time. But I know one thing."

He stares off into the rolling clouds, and he does a little jig with the lightning. After a few minutes Myra interrupts his dance and asks, "What's that you know, Uncle Sam?"

"I know there some bad folks buried in that cemetery. There's two men that kill each other in a duel back in the 1800's. They as mean their grave markers won't stand up. There's a man that kill his whole family back in 1929 and a feller that was murdered at Parchman 'bout twelve years ago. There's a outlaw sheriff from down in Jackson County and my ol' mule Sonny, meanest mule that ever lived. And every worthless Van Zandt that ever walked the face of the earth, 'ceptin that lil ol' baby."

Sam claps his hands rapidly as if to scare away the coming night. "You know, child, I think I'd rather be buried in Copiah County where my brother and his wife is buried; I'll have to talk to Miz Hattie 'bout that though."

He steals a look back at the cemetery as darkness creeps in among the graves. "I'm cold. Let's get out of these wet clothes."

Minnie and Scrom are curled up in a straight back chair sitting close to the wall. Sam reaches down and scratches each cat behind the ears and asks, "Minnie, what you think 'bout a name namin' 'er baby God?"

Minnie replies with a wide yawn and a long stretch. The screen door slams behind Sam, and the smell of strong coffee pours out onto the porch. Myra improvises her own little lightning jig and sings softly, "Me and you...What we gonna do," as the nodding daffodils disappear into the dark.

MOTHER'S DREAM MACHINE
by
Kim Clements
(Mississippi Delta
Junior College)
3rd Place Poetry, 1985

Ten-cent horsey rides
Put in a dime
Jump Astride!

Mother smiles softly as she watches me race,
the dust in my eyes the wind in my face.
I ride! I kick! I scream! I shout!
as I whirl the mechanical horse about!
You watch me gallop as I cling to his mane
as I go faster and faster down make-believe lane.
You watch my imagination run wild
like it can do only in the mind of a child.
You never could tell me that that horse wasn't real.
You could never quite tell me he was a horse made of steel.
You always encouraged believing in dreams
no matter how vague or silly they seemed.
You knew that one day I'd find out what you knew
that dreams will only sometimes come true.
You knew that in time the truth would steal
all of my dreams that really weren't real.
But you still said, "Keep hoping and dreaming
and planning and scheming,
and when all of your dreams crash down at one time
come to me child and I'll lend you a dime.
The very same dime that I've had by my side,
in my purse,
since your first
dress pony ride."

UNFINISHED PORTRAIT
by
Frances Pounds
(Northwest Mississippi
Junior College)
1st Informal Essay, 1985

One morning while eating my oatmeal I noticed that the little plaque with the gold edge was showing its age and wondered when Mother would replace it. It had been hanging in the same spot all of my life and, as far as I was concerned, it was just one piece of bric-a-brac too many. As I look back, I am surprised how I changed my mind about it.

Marie Saunders had been like a sister to me for five years. She and I had been flounders, crabbing, and sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. We had dressed like twins for the Mardi Gras and yelled until we were hoarse at the Sugar Bowl games. We had suffered through biology exams together, and we both had taken art lessons from Mrs. Thompson.

Marie was a real artist, especially good with oils. She wanted to do my portrait and give it to my mother. When Mother heard of Marie's intentions, she, along with Marie, coerced me into posing. The mere thought of sitting still was, for me, a pain, but Marie insisted. We had a long weekend coming up in April, the perfect time, she said, for her to do my portrait. Near the end of the week preceding, at the last minute, I broke my promise to Marie in order to visit my sister in New Orleans.

Before I left on Thursday, Marie went shopping with me for shoes. After I had tried on fifteen pairs, the saleslady growled, "What you need is a new pair of feet!"

Marie relieved the tension by telling about the last time we had been sailing: "Suddenly," her story went, "the wind shifted, and the boom of the sailboat knocked me flat." even though she had told this same story a dozen times, it was funnier to me each time she told it.

Even though my sister did everything possible to entertain me while I was in New Orleans, the trip was as ill-fitted as my new brown shoes. I kept thinking of Marie and felt guilty about skipping out on her as I had done. I should have been flattered, I reproached myself, that she would even consider doing my portrait. She could have found ten better-looking subjects who would have posed at her convenience and paid her for her work. My thoughts rambled, tinged with guilt. Next week, I reconciled myself, I'll pose tirelessly. Besides, I'll give her a birthday party and buy her the gold bracelet she liked so much at Snyder's.

When I got home, I kicked off my new brown shoes and started to unpack. When my brother came in, I could tell by his expression that something was wrong. "There's no easy way to tell you this," he announced abruptly. "A horrible accident just occurred at Fifth and Main. One of the victims was Marie."

My entire body felt numb. I could see that I was walking toward the window but felt no movement. I could vaguely hear my brother's voice, but it was lost in space.

The next three weeks were like a horrible dream. Each time I saw a sailboat, I thought of Marie. When I opened the closet door and saw my new brown shoes, I was reminded of her. Seeing my cat, Fluffy, reminded me of the last time Marie had helped me get the antibiotics down her throat when she was injured in a cat fight. Our house was filled with memories. The crab net hanging by the garage door, the silly hats we wore to the Mardi Gras, the charcoal pencil in my desk drawer, and the white silk blouse that I forgot to return--they all reminded me of Marie.

Mother kept telling me that time would take care of my grief, but instead it seemed to get worse. I tried to eat, but nothing tasted good; and sleep was like a form of torture. I drank warm milk, I listened to soft music, I tried to name all the different kinds of cars that I had seen. All efforts were futile. I was restive and enervated from fatigue. I tried to paint a mental picture of what I considered the most tranquil place on earth, Biloxi Bay. As I lay in the dark, I imagined standing at the edge of the water on a warm June day with the sun on my face and the wind in my hair. In my imagination, the oak trees were swaying in the breeze on Land Island, and the seagulls were lighting on the end of the pier nearby. Then, toward the pier, came a beautiful sailboat--Oh no! I tried a "shopping spree." First, I imagined I bought a nice blue wool suit and a white blouse with a big bow in front. Then I thought of shoes--but no!

I got out of bed and opened the drapes. The world looked dark and sad as though someone had hung a mourner's veil over my window. As I walked to the kitchen, the clock struck five. As I sat at the table, my eyes focused on the little plaque with the gold edge. I read it for the very first time.

God grant me
the serenity
to accept the things
I cannot change
the courage
to change the things
I can
and the wisdom to know
the difference

I made breakfast for Mother and cleaned the kitchen. I dusted everything--including the little gold plaque. I stopped by the hospital and visited a friend, weeded the garden, and studied my algebra. Then I touched up the gold paint on the little plaque and put it back in its place.

THE BLUE PARLOR
by
Bobbie Crudup
(Meridian Junior College)
1st Short Story, 1986

40

"Just call her Mademoiselle--never mind her last name," Mother Cachere told us at the First Assembly of the school year. Mother went on to explain that Mademoiselle was a well known concert pianist from France who wanted to avoid publicity. She was preparing for a concert tour of the Midwest the following summer and wanted a quiet place to practice undisturbed.

She couldn't have chosen a better place to be undisturbed, I thought. The Academy was hidden away in the Louisiana countryside, miles from a town of any size. It was so quiet that in study hall we could hear the wind whistling through the tall pines by the Chapel and cows mooing in nearby fields. The loudest noise we ever heard at the Academy was the Angelus bell ringing three times a day. Mademoiselle was coming to the right place if it was quiet she wanted.

"Mademoiselle must not be disturbed in any way by you students. I expect perfect conduct from you in this matter." Mother Cachere's pale blue eyes had a way of making a girl feel guilty before she had a chance to do anything wrong. Several girls slid down in their seats as if trying to hide.

"Don't slump--Susie, Anne Claire, Maria--sit like ladies!" The three girls quickly straightened their backs against their chairs. Mother continued, "Mademoiselle has graciously consented to teach two music students from the Academy while she is staying with us. From the high school, we have choosen Diane Elder."

Wouldn't you know it, I thought,Diane Elder, of course. Good things always happen to Diane. I looked to see her reaction. She was sitting quietly, smiling, accepting her latest piece of luck calmly. Her light blonde hair curled under in a perfect pageboy, and the school uniform--a navy blue wool skirt and white blouse--looked almost stylish on her. Her hands were perfectly positioned on her lap--left hand with the palm up, right hand laid across it palm down. Her white gloves were tight and smooth, secured by a tiny pearl button at each wrist. A two-inch wide sapphire grosgrain ribbon crossed her right shoulder and circled to meet itself at her waist on the left side. The ribbon was pinned at her waist with a round gold pin engraved "DIANE," and the tails of the ribbon hung down to the hem of her skirt. The ribbon showed that she had been chosen as a leader of the senior class. Diane wore the blue ribbon casually, as if it were something she just happened to find in her chest of drawers, instead of an honor anybody would have worked hard to have. Most of my friends in the 8th grade wanted to be just like her.

Mother Cachere's voice interrupted my thoughts about Diane. "And from the lower school, we have choosen Barbara Jean Smith," she said. I wanted to jump up and shout. Instead, I tried to imitate Diane's calm smile. I had to bite my lip, though. Music was very important in my life. Secretly, I was hoping to be a famous pianist someday.

After the Assembly ended, on the way to math class, I whispered to my friend Susie, "I'm so excited, I could die. Imagine taking music from a real concert pianist!"

Susie wrinkled her nose and said, "I'll bet she'll be strict."

"Who cares?" I said. "If you knew anything about music,you'd understand. I don't mind how strict she is. Nobody can be a real musician without working hard."

"Diane probably could," Susie said. Sometimes Susie could be really irritating. I didn't say another word.

The next morning, Susie and I were sitting on the bench at the tennis courts waiting our turn for a game when the school car pulled up in front of the lay faculty cottage. A woman dressed in a navy blue suit got out.

I punched Susie's arm. "Look--that must be Mademoiselle."

"She's not very pretty, is she?"

Susie was right--Mademoiselle wasn't very pretty. She was a little plump, and her brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun. But she was talking and gesturing, smiling and looking around. Clarence the driver was laughing, which he never did, so she must be nice. At least, I hoped so, because I was getting very nervous about taking lessons from a well-known musician.

That afternoon, a truck arrived at the visitor's entrance to the Academy and five men unloaded a grand piano. They wrestled it up the hall and into the blue parlor. I guessed that the nuns had decided the parlor would make a good music studio, since they only used the room when the Bishop came for a visit. I was supposed to be bringing a message from Mother Cachere to the sister who was keeping the visitor's door that day, so I had to pass right by while all this was going on. That's how I got to see everything. The men were sweating as they tugged and pushed the piano. When they had gotten it half way through the door, one of the men said, "Hold up fellas," and he went over to the window and opened it. The wind rushed into the room, billowing out the blue

moiré curtains. When they got the piano all the way into the room, the men stood around breathing deeply. The piano was so large that it made the small tables and blue velvet chairs look insignificant. Its mahogany case was dark and rich against the plain white walls. I wanted to touch it, but I didn't dare. After a few minutes' rest, the men pushed the little blue velvet chairs aside to make room for the piano opposite the window. They were just finishing up when Mademoiselle came flying down the hallway, her face flushed from moving so fast. When she saw the piano in place, she said, "Ahhh," and stroked it as if it were a pet dog. After the men left, she sat at the piano and began to play Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." It took my breath away. I was leaning against the doorjamb listening when Sister doorkeeper came up behind me.

"Did you want something, Barbara Jean?"

Did I want something? Yes, I did. I wanted to play like Mademoiselle. But I just said, "No, Sister," handed her the envelope from Mother Cachere, and left for study hall.

On Monday I went back to the blue parlor for my first lesson. When I knocked, Mademoiselle opened the door, smiled, and spoke rapidly in French. Mother Cachere had warned me that Mademoiselle didn't know much English. My one year of "baby" French--the kind where you learn the French word for an object, then color a picture of the object in a little colorbook--was not much help in a real conversation. During that lesson, and in the lessons that followed, Mademoiselle and I used a makeshift language of our own, a mixture of English, French, Italian musical terms, and sign language. When I played well, Mademoiselle smiled, her eyes sparkled, and she nodded encouragement. When things went badly, she frowned, shook her head, and said,"Non, non." Sometimes she took my hands and placed them a certain way on the piano keys. If all else failed, she played the piece to show me how it should sound. When that happened, the blue parlor seemed like a different place, far removed from ordinary life--a place where nothing existed but music.

Sometimes, after she played, I would ask, "Will I ever be able to play like that, Mademoiselle?"

"Practice...practice," was her only answer.

I did begin practicing more, and my playing improved as the weeks went by. With each lesson Mademoiselle's smile grew wider, and she nodded so much that often her face grew red.

"Practice, practice," Mademoiselle kept urging. The strange thing was, the more I practiced, the more I realized how far I was from playing the way I wished I could. Luckily, I was able to go to the practice rooms whenever I had a spare moment. Most music students could only go at their regular, assigned practice hour. But Diane and I were allowed to practice anytime, since Mother Cachere said we were "students in a special situation." Diane seldom practiced extra, but she should have. Her Bach certainly needed work. And sometimes I could hear her playing "Body and Soul" or "Charmaine" during her practice time. When I asked her how she liked taking music from Mademoiselle, she said, "She expects too much. Mother Mouton last year was easier. I'm not going to kill myself practicing."

One Monday in March when I went for my lesson, Diane was in the blue parlor talking to Mademoiselle. Since she had had three years of high school French, Diane could almost carry on a conversation. I gathered that they were talking about the Southeastern Louisiana Music Festival Competition in April. Mademoiselle had decided that Diane and I should go to the Competition. Diane would play Chopin's "Polonaise." My festival piece would be "Golliwog's Cake Walk" by Debussy. The idea of going to the festival really excited me. I began to spend even more time practicing. Susie complained, "All you ever think of is practicing that Golliwog song. It's positively sickening. You don't even care whether you have any friends or not."

"That's not true, Susie," I said. But actually it was almost true. "Golliwog" had such a strange rhythm and so many surprising sharps and flats. It was difficult for me, and I wanted to get it right. Besides, I noticed that Mademoiselle didn't have much time for friends either. I heard her practicing more and more as the time for her concert tour grew closer. Sometimes she would repeat the same phrase over and over until even I felt like screaming.

Finally, two days before the festival, Diane and I met in the studio for our final rehearsal. Diane went first with "Polonaise" and Mademoiselle was standing by the piano smiling and nodding. Then,without any warning, Mademoiselle slammed her open palm down on the top of the piano. Diane's hands stopped

in midair and she looked up wide-eyed. She pushed the piano bench back and started to get up. "Non, non, continue," Mademoiselle said, still smiling pleasantly.

"But what did I do?" Diane said. Mademoiselle answered in French--just a few sentences.

Diane listened, shook her head, and began to smile. Before long, she had to put her hand over her mouth to hide her giggles.

"What is it? What's going on?" I asked her.

"Mademoiselle says we have to learn to keep on playing no matter what happens. She says that at the festival people will probably make noise or move around and we mustn't get distracted. She wants us to practice trying to distract each other."

It was a crazy idea. But it was the most fun I had had in ages. Diane launched into "Polonaise" again. I circled the piano banging on the lid every now and then. Mademoiselle stood by, watching. I really got carried away with it all. I began to giggle and make faces at Diane, even put my thumbs in my ears and wiggled my fingers at her, trying to make her laugh. She got revenge, though, when it was my turn to play. It's almost impossible to keep to difficult timing with someone carrying on like she did. Even Mademoiselle thought it was a little too much when Diane kicked the piano bench. But after several turns playing, Diane and I were virtually undistractable. Mademoiselle was very pleased. Diane and I decided that playing at the festival would be a cinch after this rehearsal.

And, for me, it was. I played at 10:30 the morning of the festival. It went really well. Mademoiselle beamed and her face grew red. By noon my rating was posted--Superior. Diane played at 2:15 that afternoon. She missed a few notes and her timing was off at one point. Mademoiselle shook her head and sighed. But while Diane was playing, the wind blew the door shut with a bang. The judge nearly jumped out of her seat. Diane didn't even blink, just kept on playing as if nothing had happened. The judge was very impressed with Diane's poise--that was plain to see. She scribbled comments in the margin of her copy of "Polonaise" and gave Diane a big smile when she finished playing. Diane got a rating of Superior. I knew she really only deserved Excellent for the way she had played. She was just lucky the wind blew that door shut while she was playing.

After the festival, Diane and I had no more music lessons. Mademoiselle had closed herself up in the blue parlor to prepare for her concert tour in two weeks. It was a relief to me not to have to practice for a while. I had to do some serious studying to pull up my grades, which had slipped badly while I practiced so much for the festival. And it was nice to have time for friends again. I hadn't realized how much I missed them. Susie said, "You're almost human again, B.J." Even so, I spent as much of my spare time as I could standing outside the door of the blue parlor listening to Mademoiselle play. With my eyes closed, I imagined I was doing the playing...in a packed concert hall. The audience loved me. Once or twice the applause was so loud, I didn't even hear the Angelus bell and was late for Chapel.

In the middle of exam week, Mademoiselle sent for Diane and me to say good-bye. When we went into the blue parlor, we saw that the piano was gone. There was an empty space where it had been. The curtains were opened wide. Sun light was reflecting brightly on the white walls and the blue velvet chairs looked bluer than ever. Mademoiselle was standing at the open window, her back to us. When she turned around, she looked different. Her hair was loose, down around her shoulders, and she was thinner. The navy blue suit she always wore hung loosely on her. And there was something strange about her hands. On each fingertip there was a small bandage.

"What happened to your hands, Mademoiselle?" Diane asked. Mademoiselle just lifted her eyebrows, shrugged her shoulders as if the subject wasn't important, and told Diane something in French.

"She says," Diane translated for me,"she says her hands will be fine. She just wore the skin off practicing." Diane was shaking her head in disbelief. She obviously couldn't imagine anyone practicing enough to wear the skin off her fingers.

But I could. I knew what it was like to practice for hours, then realize it wasn't enough. A concert pianist like Mademoiselle could never be satisfied with less than her best effort. So, of course, she would keep on practicing, even if she wore the skin off her fingers. I could understand exactly what had happened to Mademoiselle in the blue parlor.

"Oh, Mademoiselle," I said.

She took both my hands into her bandaged hands and looked into my eyes. Even though she spoke very slowly in French, I couldn't understand her.

I turned to Diane. "What did she say?"

Diane shrugged. "She said you have so much talent. She hopes you will practice hard and become a concert pianist someday."

Practice hard? I looked at my hands with their smooth pink fingertips. As much as I had practiced getting ready for the music festival, I hadn't come anywhere near wearing the skin off my fingers. I looked at Mademoiselle's fingertips with their neat gauze bandages. On the third finger of her right hand a little blood had seeped through the gauze. I wondered how much practicing it took to make such raw spots.

"Mademoiselle, I...Thank you," was all I could manage to say, and I couldn't even smile good-bye at her.

The next day she was gone. I went to the blue parlor and stood in the doorway. Someone had drawn the blue curtains and moved a small table and two blue velvet chairs where the piano had been. The room was utterly still and airless. I tried to remember the music that had filled the blue parlor--Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy--but there wasn't even an echo, just a strange sad silence. When I left, I carefully closed the door of the blue parlor behind me.

REMINISCENCE
by
Joseph Alexander
(Holmes Junior College)
1st Place Poetry, 1986

What did you think, old fellow, when you saw
the new-born wrinkles of a leaf in spring
smooth into coolness that defied the sun
in lawn chair grottoes underneath the trees
where fantasies could grow? What of that shade
that drew lawn chairs together with a touch
of tenderness that's mimicked in mown grass
and well-kept flower gardens, and the scent
of laden tables, and the touch of lips
at meeting and at parting? What did you think?
Old man, you felt the air grow colder,
saw the shedding leaves, and gazed upon
your wrinkle covered skin that once was smooth.
Did you recall first wrinkling time
and warmth of touching cheirs
in long embrace upon a pleasant lawn?

KITTEN TOUCHES BACK
by
Suzanne Clemons
(Northeast Mississippi
Junior College)
2nd Short Story, 1986

She was a simple child, a product of years of struggle in the red clay hills of cotton soil. As a child, she delighted in exploring the North Mississippi spread of rolling hills, pristine underbrush and semi-fertile soils that had supported the generations before her. Those Mississippi 1950'S didn't show the greatest kindness to those who worked the soil. Cotton Top and Bet will finish feeding those ole pigs...they done fed the cow. We get to play all day. I'll climb trees and see everything. The scent of wild roses brushes her nose as she feels May's caressing warmth. The sun's cozy blanket would have made her lazy if the full day's play hadn't crowded her mind. Her thoughts flicker to nature's playground that lay in the grove of trees beside the sweet potato patch. The small trees, still easily bent, could be rode for miles, at least until her legs grew limp from bounding up and down, bending and rebending until the muscles gave to fatigue. The thoughts of "tree horses" trigger a surge of energy, and she bounds to her feet. The tire swing beckons her, and she pulls into its cradle. Inner threads of material on her fingertips give reassurance of holding on, and the heavy synthetic smell of rubber touches her

nose as a warm breath of air brushes her face. Higher and higher she flies, grasping a glimpse over the white roses of the baby-plants that lay in formation in the family's huge necessary garden. The full bursts of wind whisper in her ears, gravity tugging her in pendulating motions--her mousy brown hair tosses with every gliseading move. The aged oak is completely oblivious to her perch on its gigantic, twisted limb.

The front door breaks, and Cotton Top's white hair glistens in the bright sunlight followed by the pale tones of Bet's dishwater blonde. "Daddy said go play." Cotton Top bounds across the grass, heeled by Bet's quickened steps. "We're going to the woods."

"I'm gonna go too." Goat struggles to stop the swing. With one leg dangling long, she dismounts in an instant run. Bounding the rows in the sweet potato patch, she scurries to catch the two heads bobbing in the distance. Cotton Top disappears into the woods and Bet follows. Goat enters the grove and moves in the cool of shades surrounded by the rich greens of new life. She listens as the two voices fight to cover the timed notes of birds speaking of spring.

Cotton Top grabs the grape vine and swings wide over the red clay gully. Bet sits firmly, legs x-ed, and gathers pine cones from last year's crop.

"I wanna swing," Goat whines. "It's my turn."

"I don't care." Cotton Top releases his binding grip. "I'm building a fort."

Goat fixes her hands and in one fire thrust takes flight, dangling vine between her spindle legs. Cotton Top rustles away and reappears sweeping as two salvaged limbs drag behind. He places them in lean-to fashion, disappears, and returns, repeating the actions. He slides under; his head sticks from the side. "Well need some leaves for the top." He beckons the two girls for help.

"I'll get 'em." Goat abandons the vine and breaks the tender umbrella limbs as she passes, tossing the raised branches near Cotton Top's feet. Marching along, selecting and breaking the dead limbs, she returns her load to the pile. With each trek, she wanders still further from the building site.

"Come here! I found a dog." Her voice smothers the subtle sounds of nature, her eyes fixed upon the dog lying asslen, motionless, and wide-eyed.

"You're lying. They ain't no dog." Bet approaches in disbelief.

The two stand staring. Footsteps rustle behind.

"Look, a dead dog." Bet firmly speaks.

"Poor ole hound dog." Goat sympathizes. "He died, didn't he?"

Cotton Top edges closer, followed cautiously by the two girls. Goat clinches his shirt in both hands.

"I'll tell Daddy."

"Daddy don't care 'bout no ole dead dog. He ours. We found him." Cotton Top speaks with authority.

"We'll bury him and have a funeral, huh?" Bet questions as the mid-day sun floods through the trees.

"I know--we can cook him. We'll build a fire and roast him. He croaked anyway." Cotton Top kneels near the carcass. "Ya'll go get a knife and some matches. I'll get some wood. Hurry up. Don't tell nobody. This is our dog."

Bet and Goat push their way through the underbrush. "Poor ole dead dog. What killed him, Bet?"

"I don't know. He probably hungry."

"Maybe he was a good dog and just died like Nickel did. I still miss Nickel--she'll miss this ole hound dog! Nickel was a good dog, wasn't he, Bet?"

"Yeh--yeh, he was. Come on. We gotta get the knife and the matches. You'll have to shoot and do it. Goat. Don't be telling nobody!"

Goat takes a deep breath as Bet opens the rickety screen door."Momma, we're hungry!"

"Where're ya'll been--where's your brother?"

"Playing. He's hungry too. Can we eat in the woods?" Goat leans around the kitchen door, finding her mother knitting in the front room rocking chair, her stomach bulging through the thin cotton dress.

"I suppose. Fix it up and put it in the lard bucket there in the bottom of the dish cabinet. Don't forget to bring the bucket back. I'll need it to pack your daddy's dinner for the field tomorrow. Get a jar of peaches from

the cupboard and those biscuits on the table. Bring me the jar, and I'll open it for you."

Goat wraps the biscuits in a kitchen towel as Bet pulls the home-canned peaches from the shelf and grabs a spoon to pry the lid. The vacuum-lid pops and is quickly replaced.

Goat edges the butcher knife beside the biscuits and closes the lid on the dinner bucket. Bet reaches above her head to the match tin and fills her small hand with wooden matches.

"Get some tea from the ice box and behave yourselves," Mother yells as the door slams shut.

The two bound across the back yard.

"Where'd you put the knife, Goat?"

"In the bucket. She didn't even know, huh?"

"Hurry up. We gotta go."

Cotton Top stood impatiently in the distance. They quicken their steps and break into a run.

"Let's eat right here." Goat sets the dinner bucket down, plops to the ground and spreads lunch between them, all three drinking from the quart jar of cold tea.

"You two sure took long enough."

"You was hungry too." Goat's food muffled her voice.

"Ju' get the matches?"

"In my sock." Bet spoke between chews.

"We're ready then." Cotton Top stands up and throws a mostly eaten biscuit aside.

"We're really gonna cook'e?" Bet was on her feet.

"Yeh. Come on, you sissy girls."

The three near the site, Cotton Top armed with the knife. The dog lay grotesque and helpless. Cotton Top drops to his knees, hesitates, moves the knife, and touches the taut, hairy flesh. One shove; skin rips and splits. The humid, heavy stench of rot bursts. He drops the knife and, open-handed, grabs his face as thumb and finger pinch his nose. Emesis sounds of wet vomit explode. They bolt away, gagging, heaving, and gasping in the putrid smell. Sitting, heads hung low, they struggle to regroup. Limp, they fight the easy, natural urge to vomit again and again. The "bleack" sounds of heaving cease. They sit motionless, not daring to speak, and one by one they lie back and relax as relief moves in.

"God, that's awful. That'll kill ya, that ugly smell. Boy, did it stink," Bet babbled.

Goat rolls and moans in the dirt.

Cotton Top hesitantly spoke, "We gotta get the knife. I lost it."

"I'm not going back," Goat moans.

"Not me." Bet sits up. "We'll be sick again."

"Listen." Cotton Top stands straight, head turned. "Grandpaw Foster's calling us. I'll get the knife. Ya'll get the dinner bucket. Don't tell nobody, not nobody." He moves away."

"We're coming," Bet answers Grandpaw Foster's yells. Retrieving the remnants of lunch, they approach Grandpaw Foster standing anxiously at the edge of the sweet potato patch.

"Where's Cotton Top, girls? We gotta talk."

"He hadda go pee," Bet cleverly spoke. "He said he'd be here in a minute."

"You two go in. We'll be along in a minute." He turned and yelled for Cotton Top again.

"I really got sick," Goat whimpers.

"And she didn't! Don't talk about it--they'll be trouble--just don't say nothing."

They move past the aged oak, across the yard, and into the house. Teddy lay across the bed reading as Aunt slept at the end.

Grandpaw Foster's heavy feet come across the porch. Cotton Top disappears, laying the knife on the kitchen table, and returns. The five stand in conference formation. Grandpaw Foster grows stern. "Your maw and dad had to go to town. It's your maw's time."

"Time for what?" Goat questions.

"Time to have the baby." Toddy speaks matter-of factly.

"Oh."

Goat lies tired in the cool black night. The old black dog sneaks into her head. "I hope Mamma don't die." She speaks to the thickness of the night.

"Be quiet and go to sleep." Bat whispers next to her.

Goat lies still--crickets and whippoorwills sing their distant chorus.

Goat's eyelids open to the glow of daylight. She hears the sounds of breakfast from the kitchen. She moves to dress for the day and hurries to the crudely modeled bathroom in the back of the house. She pretends to wash her face by wetting it and just as quickly drying it off. She sits at her place on the bench. The table is crowded with breakfast preparations. Chatter fills the room. Her mind wanders to Mamma, and she wishes she was home.

A week passes before her daddy returns, and then just long enough to gather fresh clothes and leave the dirty. Grandpaw had asked what they named the little girl. "Don't have one," he had said. "May not need one." Daddy spoke hurriedly, leaving in the dusty black '50 model Ford. Grandpaw kept telling Goat that her mamma would be home soon. Goat remembered how much better it was when Mamma was home.

The door slams, and Grandpaw Foster's footsteps move through the house. "Kids, you mamma's coming home tomorrow. Mr. Glen talked to your dad in town. It was touch and go for a while." Relief softens his aged voice. "Ya'll get to the chores. We have to ready this place for your mamma and the baby." Grandpaw busies himself with the dishes.

"They bringing the baby home too? Where's the baby gonna sleep? They ain't no room for a baby." Goat speaks impatiently.

"Don't think like that, Goat. She'll sleep with your mamma and dad." Grandpaw grins.

Goat lay covered to her nose. She could almost feel the warmth of her mamma's cozy lap as the covers snuggled around her. Splotches of light flicker cautiously across her closed eyes. Why couldn't she go to sleep? She slowly drifts into nothingness. She hurries through breakfast and rushes to stack the dishes. It was Bat's turn to wash. She moves to the front porch, glaring down the S-turn that lay between two newly planted cotton fields. A cloud of dust bubbles in the distance. "Somebody's coming," she squeals.

"It's them," Cotton Top calls in excitement. "They're coming now."

One by one, they gather at the end of the antique, minus-one-wheel, wagon, Goat jumping as though she were riding a free horse. The old Ford moves cautiously up the dusty drive and stops with a jerk. The driver's door opens, and Daddy grins and supports Mamma and the new baby to the ground. He shoves a week's personal collection into the hands of the crowd.

"Let your mamma get inside, Goat. She needs to sit down with the baby." Goat steps on the spot.

The family line makes its way inside as Mamma painfully pulls up the steps on Grandpaw's arm. Chatter and broken sentences fill the front room. Mamma eases stiffly into the rocking chair, not able to keep up with the questions.

"What's its name?" Cotton Top stands beside Grandpaw Foster as he holds the baby close to his face--one leg stretches, an arm waggles, but the eyes never open.

"Kathy," Mamma answers. Goat moves to Mamma's lap. "Mamma'll love you standing there, little Goat. My tummy's real sore. Be careful. It'll take time to get well."

Goat gets her distant love and moves away, head down, watching her feet to the front grass. She lies for a long time, looking up at fluffy cotton clouds parading far her across patches of gray-blue sky.

Five months of long days and short nights were the order: tilling, plowing, middle-busting and picking for those who were "big" enough for hard labor. Goat's days of work with diapers, rocking and attempts at keeping the baby quiet only repeated their sequence. She longed for play and delighted in the

stolen times of frolic. She sneaked to play in cool shades on hot, humid summer days. Mamma's calls in the distance meant only one thing--work. Diapers to be hung, glaring white in November's sun, rocking the baby until, with tired sweaty arm, she tiptoed to lay her down and begged her not to wake.

Sleep came too easy those days. Even the nights,Goat thought, were consumed with cryings that woke her in the middle of beautiful dreams and deep, restful sleep. I'll do the dishes, she thought, hands moving too slowly, and then I'll--

"Goat, come take the baby. I need to get your daddy's dinner. He'll be in from the fields to eat." Mamma's voice echoes through the room.

Why--why? Goat dismounts the straight-backed chair. The only thing she ever does is cry. She inches into the front room.

"You keep her quiet, Goat." Pots rattle and bang in the kitchen.

Goat sits in the all too familiar rocking chair, staring into the tiny delicate face. "You not gonna cry, are ya?" Goat speaks to a face that only stares back.

"Kitten's not gonna cry. Give her to me. I'll take her. Get me my medicine from the kitchen and go play." Grandpaw Foster takes the rocking chair.

Goat grabs the pills and a nearly full glass of water. Grandpaw swallows, and she returns both to the cluttered kitchen and takes flight.

Her retreat is made to the fermenting smell of over-ripe fruit under the peach trees. Birds sing a unleashed, distant melody, and she tries to look at every sunbaked leaf on each drying limb. She lies and twists to her side. Reality passes and sleep devours her. She feels groggy, rested and chilled. The cool late afternoon touches her bones. She moves, stands, and makes a path to the back door.

"Help your momma with supper--fell asleep, didn't ya?" Daddy greets her in the kitchen. The nothingness of sleep, school, doing, redoing--days come and pass away.

"Goat, as soon as you're ready, get Aunt clean and dressed." Mamma's tear-sealed voice speaks in painful, blunt tones. "Funeral's at 2:00, and it's an hour's drive."

"I want Grandpaw back, Bet." Goat reads the cold stone. "Henry Clifton Foster--Born: August 24, 1878--Died: November 15, 1956. Jesus called him home."

"He was home wasn't he, Bet? I want him back." Tears flood Goats eyes.

"He's not coming back, not never." Bet's eyes bulge with hurt. "Come on, they're leaving us."

"Girls, get this mess picked up. I've got to get us something to eat. Goat, stop that baby from crying. She should be ready for a nap." Pain lingers in Mamma's voice.

Back and forth Goat pushes, her mind and body filled with death. She looks at the baby. She moves and claws up Goat's small, burdened chest. I want my grandpaw. Goat rocks and again supresses the tears. She feels two, warm, delicate hands touch her neck. Kitten pushes, wiggles, and lays her fresh, baby-oiled head upon Goat's too small shoulder. Goat feels the closeness of the tiny body. Her senses fill with the full warmth of her baby...baby sister. Grandpaw would of really loved her now 'cause Kitten touches back...back and forth she rocks, and rocks, and rocks.

A NEW RITUAL
by
Pat Hassell
(Meridian Junior College)
1st Place Poetry, 1987

Done again, the ritual cleansing bath
of water dipped three times among the stones.
Dipped clean to drink in steaming aftermath.
Dipped in and sprinkled over steaming bones
that lie in caustic writhing, faces gone
in second light of night's exploding sun.
A new song is sung; a hollow ritual song
by hollow men who have no place to run.
The ceremony's lost. A mutant rite

evolves from babies born of the dying men
who wash in water hot from burning night
and lose their faces from their father's sin.
They remember only what they're told
by dripping water and faceless men of old.

ON CHANGING A FLAT TIRE AND WONDERING WHERE TO GO
by
Jessica Mullen
(Hinds Junior College)
2nd Place Poetry, 1987

Like a still cut motion picture screen
a wildfire of clover blazes at the roadside
tire-iron gripped in calloused hands
leather boots powdered in road dust
caught for a split second
in the fresh breath of unmeasured boundaries
wide still air

Time forgotten
only the thoughts of a full tank of gas
and the twenty dollar bill
in the back pocket of faded levis
wondering how far it can take me
to the rice fields of east Texas
the sands of El Paso
the swamp bridge of the Atchafalaya
just to run easy
and catch a glimpse of myself
smiling free
in your blue road-hypnotized eyes
We were chasing summer
in roadside truck stops
endless interstates
your fingers tangled in my hair
sunburned and laughing
we fell into autumn too soon

I toss the jack in the backseat
Arms crossed on the roof of the car
I rest my chin, close my eye
and feel the distance.

THE COCK FIGHT
by
Pat Hassell
(Meridian Junior College)
1st Short Story, 1987

"Not too many people here, Manny."

"No they ain't. It's early yet."

The fight was set for three o'clock. It was only ten after two, but Jerrel had been anxious to get a good seat, one near the pit so he could watch the roosters.

"Let's sit over on Dulany's side, Manny. Since we're gonna bet on his ol' blue chicken, we 'orta root fer him."

"Yeah. We can do that, Jerrel. Jist don't get so bent up if Dulany's cock don't win. He's an ol' bird."

"But he's gonna win. Dulany's honed him up. He's old but he's the best fightin' rooster in the state. Dulany told me so. He said, 'Jerrel, I got the best fightin' rooster in the state. Can't nobody beat 'im."

"Shit Jerrel, you're simple. Cecil Kent's got the best chickens. Ol' Dulany's been lucky with his blue rooster is all."

Jerrel and Manny sat on wooden boxes on the champion side of the pit. Dulany and his hand arrived with several wire crates, each holding a rooster. They put their beer on a short wooden bench and the young hired boy began to

sort out what they would need: spurs, rags, water bottle, a quart of Black Jack. Oulany picked up the whisky and stepped up the slight incline to the row of boxes where Jerrel and Manny sat. "Boys, today is my lucky day. Today I'm gonna take Cecil Kent's ass."

"Howdy Oulany," Manny greeted the chicken fighter at the same time reaching for the bottle. "You've been real lucky, alright. That ol' blue chicken is a tough bird." He took a long pull at the whiskey and wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. Jerrel reached for the bottle and imitated Manny's drink but his eyes began to water and he coughed and sputtered the bottle back to Oulany.

"Luck, hell. I got the best birds in the state."

"See, I told ya," said Jerrel as he wiped whiskey from his face and shirt. Oulany turned the bottle up.

"Cecil Kent's been saying he matched pullets with your blue the last two fights so's he could jack up the odds on this fight. And I wouldn't put it past him," drawled Manny, like it wasn't important.

"Shit, Manny, he'd say that for sure, after he jist got two birds kilt by my bird. Ol' Blue cain't be beat. Put your money on 'im. He's gonna wipe Cecil's ass." Oulany took his Jack Daniels back to his bench and as Manny and Jerrel watched he handed a roll of bills to his boy. The boy ran up the incline to a knot of men who were taking bets on the fights.

"Is it time to bet my money, Manny?"

"Yeah, jist don't bet too much. I got me a feelin'. Put five dollars on the first fight for Oulany's spotted rooster. He's a good bird. I think he might win."

Jerrel ran to place his bet. But he stopped and hollered back to Manny. "Ain't you bettin'?"

"Not yet, Jerrel," said Manny as he watched Oulany attach spurs to the big spotted rooster. "Sumethin' goin' on here," thought Manny.

It was three o'clock and pit side was full of raucus good humor from men who had come to see the cocks fighting to the death or to when their owners called off the fight, which was rare. The roosters on both sides were being teased and angered. Oulany was teasing his spotted rooster with a big old squawking cock who had never had a fight because he was more squawk than fight. But he was good at getting other chickens mad. The spotted rooster, being held by Oulany's boy, was spurring high in the air, struggling in the boys hands to make contact with the old chicken. His eyes were red pinpoints, his nib open, his comb straight up. His neck flared like a cobra's head, swaying, looking for a chance to strike. The pit was opened and Cecil's trainer dropped in with a yellow, purple-tailed cock. Oulany's boy dropped in and they circled, pushing the roosters, held high in the air, around the pit. At the signal they released the birds.

The fight was short. Oulany's spotted bird was stronger and he flew higher than Cecil's bird. As the crowd of men yelled, cheering for their favorite rooster, the spotted cock gathered himself up, sprung upward with wings flapping and struck at the yellow bird with his metal spurs. A spur connected and the fight was over. Oulany's chicken strutted around the ring. The trainers jumped into the pit and snatched up the birds, one dead and one still wanting to fight.

"See, see Manny. I told ya Oulany's birds was the best. I won me some money. If I bet it all on Oulany I can be a rich man."

"Keep it calm, Jerrel. All the fights ain't over yet." Manny had his eye on Oulany and his boy. They were head to head, squatted down by their bench. The spotted rooster was being wiped down with an old rag. His spurs were removed and he was put back into his crate.

"Manny, I got to bet my money. I got to hurry. Fight'll start and I cain't bet after. You told me I cain't bet after the fight starts."

"Put a lid on it, Jerrel. You can bet now. But jist five dollars. [illegible] on Oulany again--but jist five. Hear me?"

"Sure Manny. You're smarter'n me. I trust ya but I sure would like to be a rich man." Jerrel ran for the odds-taker and made it back for the second fight. There were eight fights set up for the afternoon with the final one between Oulany's blue rooster and cecil's bird, a young chicken that had been in only one other fight. With each progressive fight Manny told Jerrel how much to bet on Oulany's chicken and each fight was a win for Jerrel. By the final match the crowd was in a frenzy, much the same as the birds. Betting

was heavy on both sides but with Oulany winning, the odds dropped some after each battle. Jerrel was unable to sit still on the wooden box next to Manny. Each time he won he grew more animated. The blood from the roosters' wounds, the savage din of men hot for more blood and the sure knowledge of winning his fortune drove him to bounce and yell on his box. Manny put his hand on Jerrel's arm to steady him, to get his attention. Jerrel slid back from the edge of the box which was tilted on end. The box jarred Jerrel as it popped back solid against the hard ground and Jerrel jerked around to look at his friend. His eyes were as red as the rooster's who had just fought and won. "I won me some more money. Now I'm gonna put it all on the Blue. Now I'm gonna be rich."

"Jerrel, listen to me. Don't bet on the Blue. He ain't gonna win. Cecil's red rooster's gonna win. I want you to bet of the Red so's ya can be rich like ya always wanted to. You can win it all, man, jist bet on Cecil this time."

"Naw, I ain't. Oulany's got the best chickens in the state. See my wad, Manny, I got it bettin' on Oulany."

"Try to understand. It's fixed or somethin'. Oulany's gonna lose. I been watchin' the bettin'. Oulany's bettin against his own bird this time. Trust me."

"Oulany wouldn't do that. He's honest with his birds, Manny. Ain't he?"

"Jist do what I tell ya, Jerrel." Manny then left his box to place his only bet of the day. He had been observing the gambling and he determined that Oulany had bet on his own birds before each bout but this time Oulany gave his boy a wad of money and the boy passed it to a man sitting midway up the challenger's side. The man, unknown to Manny, left his seat after looking around to see if he was being watched. He made his way to the money man and placed the bet. Manny figured the bet was crocked or Oulany's boy would have placed it as he had the others. Manny placed a hundred dollar bet against Oulany's Blue. He was confident that his bet would fatten his wallet. Jerrel had followed Manny to the money man but when it was his turn to bet he hesitated. Manny was his friend. He always listened to Manny. Manny was the one who fixed his papers for the welfare lady. Manny helped him buy groceries. Manny taught him how to use a can opener and how to cook Raviolios without burning them to the bottom of the pan. Manny had money and he was smart. Jerrel jerked his money, what he had already won plus what he had left of his welfare money, three hundred and nine dollars, out of his pants pocket. He thrust it at the money man. It was wadded, with bills sticking out of the wad, unfolding in slow motion in his hand.

"Oulany's blue chicken," he said, hoping Manny wouldn't be mad. The man scraped the wad of bills off Jerrel's palm, sorted and counted the bills and marked a paper tablet. Jerrel stood in front of the man, his eyes on the grimy pad. His fortune was written there and if he left it, it would be gone. But more men began to press money to the man and Jerrel was pushed out. He returned to his seat as the main fight was about to start.

"Did ya make your bet?" Manny asked as Jerrel plopped down on his box.

"Uh huh." Jerrel hunched forward, his hands clasped between his knees, and stared at the pit. Oulany and Cecil's boys were circling the pit with their roosters for the last time this afternoon. The birds were frantic and both trainers were bleeding on their hands and wrists where the spurs had slashed them. They didn't notice their own blood as they sparred their birds. The whistle blew. The boys jumped clear. The crowd of men stood up, roaring at the pit as the two clawing roosters jumped at each other. Oulany's blue lunged, feet first, at his enemy. They banged into each other, circled and lunged again. Their necks were stretched. Tufts on each neck flared, ringing their heads in a necklace of feathers. The tail of the blue was spread out in a brilliant fan. The red rooster spread his glossy wings and jabbed with his beak. He leaped and plunged, hissing. At each plunge both birds tried to connect with the metal spurs, needle sharp and deadly.

Jerrel's position had not changed since the beginning of the fight. He stared at the cocks in their death battle and with a clarity his slow mind seldom produced saw the nobility of the two birds locked in battle. He saw the nasty sham of the ancient duel. He saw his greed.

Oulany's Blue was tired. He was old. He was pitted against a younger bird, but he had experience on his side. He jumped, wings flapping, and rose above the shiny red bird. He sank a sharp metal spike deep in the surprised bird's brain. The red dropped on the dusty floor of the pit. Blue danced around the dead bird pecking at his splayed wings and open mouth. He flapped his wings and crowed a victory peal.

The rush of men to the odds taker left few spectators at the pit side. Manny and Jerrel sat watching the trainers collect the birds. "I'm sorry I steered ya wrong, Jerrel. I guess my feelin' was fer shit."

"I bet on Oulany's bird, Manny," said the still hunched-over man. He sat back on his wooden box and Manny saw wet streaks on his face. "I'm sorry I didn't do what cha' told me to." They watched Cecil open a paper bag and his trainer drop the red bird into it. Cecil wadded the bag up and threw it in the barrel by his bench.